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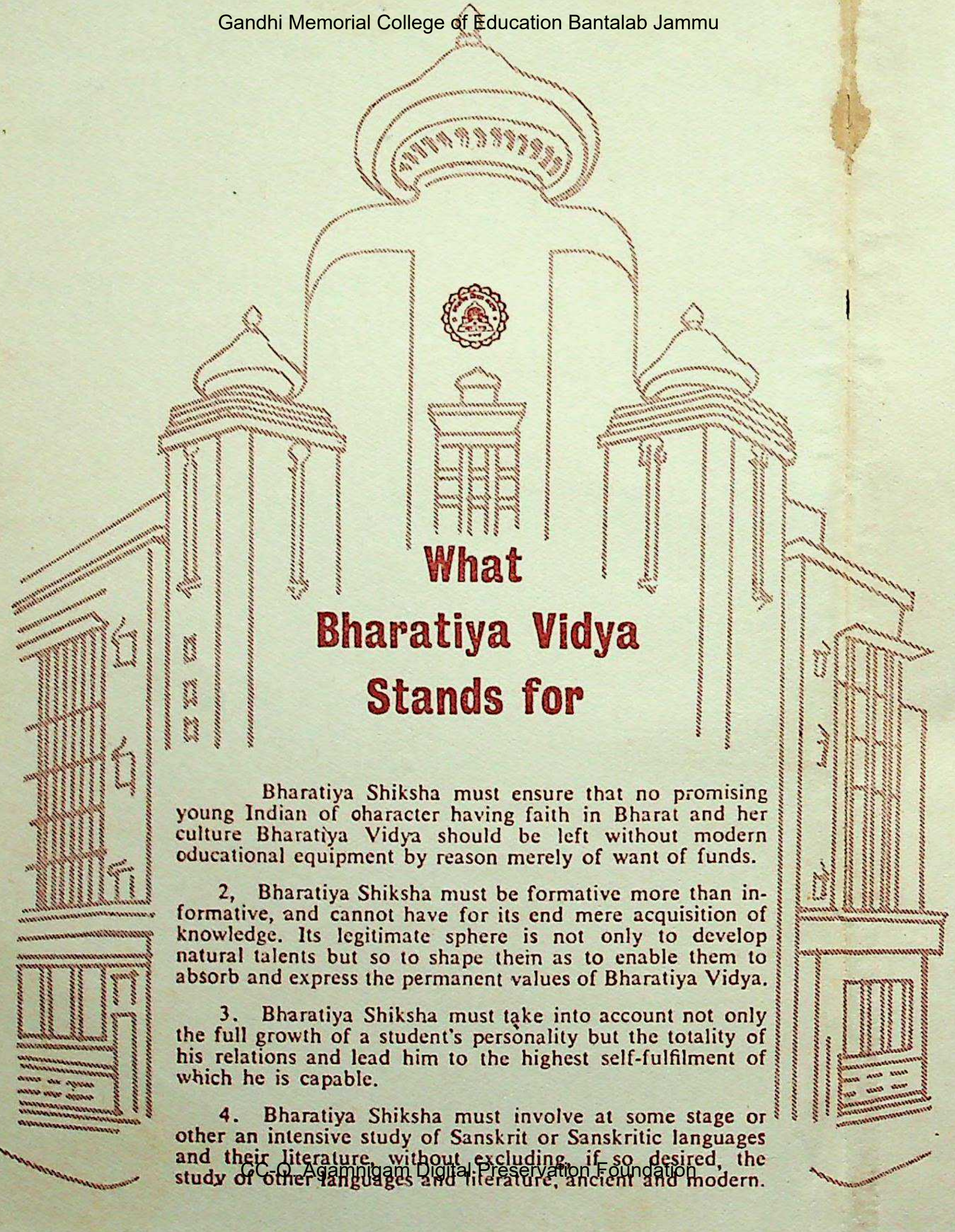
Book University Series

GLIMPSES OF GREATNESS

YOGACHARYA
HANSRAJ YADAV

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN, BOMBAY-7



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आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः ।

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

—Rigveda, 1-89-i

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

General Editors

R. R. DIWAKAR

S. RAMAKRISHNAN

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GLIMPSES OF GREATNESS

By

YOGACHARYA HANSRAJ YADAV

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GLIMPSES OF GREATNESS

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Jammu
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Dedicated

to my great Gurudev

SHRI YOGENDRAJI

(Founder, The Yoga Institute, Santacruz, India)

but for whose
constant guidance
and encouragement
my life would have had
little meaning

⁂

THE GURU

The sun illuminates in the day, the moon in the night, the tiny lamp illuminates only within the house. The Guru however removes the darkness of ignorance of the one who has surrendered to him, and enters into his heart and illumines it. It is thus that on this earth the Guru is the most important place of pilgrimage for the student.

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages; Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities: we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita* by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy, Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata:* "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

1, Queen Victoria Road,
New Delhi
3rd October 1951

K. M. MUNSHI

FOREWORD

EDUCATION MINISTER
MAHARASHTRA
Sachivalaya, Bombay--32

20th May 1971

I went through the book "Glimpses of Greatness" based on the stories from Indian Mythology. The author has made honest and deserving efforts to translate selected stories from Indian Mythology and to present the same in a simple readable form to the readers in English language. This book will be useful as a good moral educational book in view of the specific lessons indicated in each illustrated story emphasising very essential qualities and values of human nature, the importance of which even in this age of space technology is not undervalued.

(M. D. Chaudhari)

PREFACE

The stories in this book have influenced me from childhood. They were told to me by my mother, teachers and elders, for whom I have love and affection upto this time.

I wish to share the benefits I have derived from these stories with the children. They will not only benefit from the study of these stories, but they will enjoy reading them, telling them to their friends and talking about them.

The title of the book needs a little explanation. What has been attempted here is not just the narration, which, let us concede, is generally well-known in India, but an emphasis on some admirable quality *(Guna)* found in the characters who meet us in these stories. Thus Eklavya is known for his practice *(Abhyasa)*. Arjuna is remembered for his concentration *(Ekagrata)*. Prahlad claims our attention because of his devotion to God *(Bhakti)*. Like this each story is woven round some great quality personified by a character. It is earnestly hoped that our youngsters would find in these stories examples worth following and characters truly great by virtue of some noble quality of heart, and as such worth remembering as ideal men and women. This kind of assimilation from mythologies alone could save our youngsters whose life, at present, has become chaotic for want of true values of life.

Mr. P. N. Rao, who is a yoga teacher, has taken keen interest in the compilation of this book and revised its diction. I am thankful to him for all his help and cooperation.

Before I conclude I must record my deep sense of gratitude to Shri Yogendraji, Founder of The Yoga Institute, Mother Sitadevi and Dr. Jayadeva Yogendra of The Yoga Institute, but for whose constant guidance and encouragement my life would have had little meaning. My respectful *pranams* to all three of them.

HANSRAJ YADAV

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1st STORY

EKALAVYA

WHERE THERE IS A WILL...

IN olden days when vast areas were covered with dense forests full of wild animals like tigers, panthers and elephants, men used to hunt with spears and arrows. They had to be proficient in spear-throwing and archery. To keep themselves fit, they undertook a good deal of wrestling, running and swimming.

There were many hunting tribes who lived in the forest. Ekalavya was the name of a boy who belonged to a family of one such tribe, the Bhils. When he reached the age of ten years, he told his father that he wanted to be an expert archer and asked him to try and get him the best teacher. His father told Ekalavya that Dronacharya was the best but he was engaged by the Kauravas and the Pandavas to train their princes in archery. It was, therefore, not possible for Ekalavya to learn from Dronacharya.

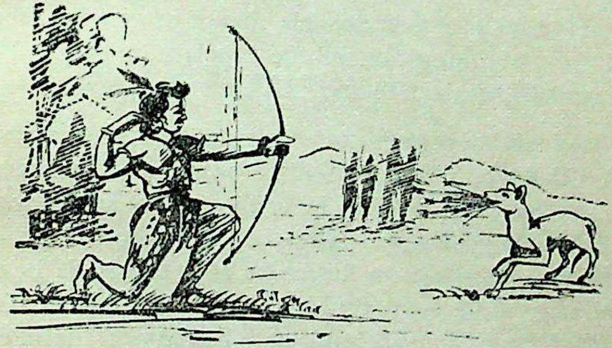
On hearing the words of praise about Dronacharya from his father, Ekalavya became more determined than ever to learn from him. He, therefore, sought his father's permission to go and stay in the Ashram of Dronacharya.

Ekalavya then left his home to meet Dronacharya and to request him. Dronacharya gave Ekalavya a patient hearing but told him that as he was in the pay of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, he could not accept anyone else as a student. He also told Ekalavya that to attain excellence in any subject, it did not really matter who the teacher was as long as the student followed three basic principles : intense desire to learn, faith in his teacher and a desire for constant practice. With these words of advice, Ekalavya left Dronacharya: though disappointed, he was full of respect for this great teacher.

He was still keen on learning how to be a great archer and decided that since he could not have the real Dronacharya as his teacher, he would make a clay image of him and draw due inspiration, while practising archery. He stayed alone in the jungle and started learning and practising continuously. His desire was intense and his faith in the clay image was very great. As the occasion demanded, he would reproach, punish or congratulate himself, as if the real Dronacharya was doing this to him.

Time went by and Ekalavya became very proficient in archery. This was proved one day when the Kaurava and the Pandava princes went out on a hunting expedition.

Under the supervision of Guru Dronacharya and accompanied by chariots, attendants and dogs, they set out for the forest to evaluate their training. They happened to come to the same forest where Ekalavya had made his home. He was at that time practising hitting a bird in flight, cutting a falling leaf in half and piercing a fruit on top of a tree by taking aim from its reflection in the water of a lake underneath. One of the hunting dogs discovered him and went scurrying off towards the princes. Ekalavya heard the barking of the dog and sent an arrow straight at him, which hit the centre of the dog's mouth and plugged it, without hurting the animal at all.



Ekalavya sent an arrow.....

The baffled dog returned to its masters with the arrow stuck in its mouth. Seeing the dog, the princes were very astonished and set out in search of the archer who could perform this remarkable feat. Along with Dronacharya, they came upon Ekalavya who was busy with his practice. Seeing Dronacharya, Ekalavya was extremely happy and prostrated himself at the feet of his master.

What Ekalavya had done to the dog aroused the envy of Arjuna, who ranked as the best archer amongst the students of Dronacharya. Looking suspiciously at Dronacharya, he asked Ekalavya who his master was. Ekalavya pointed to the clay image of Dronacharya and told Arjuna that, that was his teacher. Dronacharya then said that if Ekalavya considered him as his teacher, he should be ready to pay a tuition fee. Ekalavya was very pleased to be called a student of Dronacharya and offered to pay whatever fee he wanted.

Dronacharya now saw his chance of clearing himself from the suspicion of the Pandava princes. He demanded the right thumb of Ekalavya as tuition fee.

All those present were stunned by the demand, but Ekalavya did not hesitate even for a moment. He immediately cut off his right thumb and placed it before Dronacharya. Thus he was made an invalid for life and would no longer be able to handle bows and arrows. Arjuna could continue to remain the best of Dronacharya's students. Ekalavya's devotion to his teacher was indeed very great.

Not only were the princes and attendants deeply moved by this sacrifice, but even the Gods in heaven were moved and they showered flowers on Ekalavya. The princes commended him for his devotion and expressed sorrow at the loss of his thumb. They were worried about Ekalavya and asked him how he was going to hunt and obtain food for himself now.

But Ekalavya told them not to worry as he would still be able to take care of himself. Dronacharya and the princes then left the forest.

Ekalavya soon started practising archery with his feet and was able to make a comfortable living in due course of time. Dronacharya deprived Ekalavya of the honour of being the world's best archer but Ekalavya's name will continue to be immortal as one whose devotion to his teacher had no parallel.

2nd STORY

THE STORY OF ARJUNA

To the maina, its songs,
To the peacock, its hues,
To the tiger, its claws,
To the man—concentration.

(There is a story about God's creation of various birds, animals and finally man. It appeared that God gave some special talent, gift or equipment to each bird or animal. When it came to man, He had nothing left to give, which meant that man would have, in his life, nothing exclusively his own. Then the idea came to God in a flash. And He gave man concentration.)

IN ancient India passing an examination was not the be-all and end-all of education. Students used to live with teachers and they learned many things by closely, observing the behaviour and the way of living of their teachers. A number of years with a teacher was considered enough by way of education for a student. One his part, the student had certain duties to perform in his teacher's house. When he came thither seeking education, all that a student brought with him was a pair of wooden sandals, a stick in one hand, a fire-bowl in another hand, some blades of grass in the mouth, iron rings in the ears and a white mark on the forehead. Each of these things had some significance. The fire which the student brought with him signified that he would be responsible for looking after his teacher's daily need of food, he would collect alms or gather fruits and roots for food and cook the same. The stick in his hand was the symbol of his readiness to protect his teacher in times of danger. The grass in his mouth meant that the task of tending to the cows would be the student's. The ring in his ears conveyed a promise that the student would practise control of the senses and emotions. And lastly, the white mark on the forehead signified that the student would have an attitude of absolute surrender to his teacher.

On his part, the teacher saw to it that the pupil under his care grew properly, that he possessed physical fitness and a sharp mind and that his emotions were well-balanced. The teacher was always conscious of the faith his student had in him and he also made it clear to the student that his order should be obeyed in all circumstances. This is how education was imparted in those days. The entire arrangement was based on personal relationship between the teacher and the taught. All that was provided by way of examination was a series of practical tests conducted by the teacher.

In those days the name of Dronacharya was very popular in the field of Education. He was appointed the teacher for the children of the Royal House—the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Dronacharya's method of conducting the tests was well-known to his pupils. It generally happened that very few students managed to succeed in the tests of the Acharya (learned teacher). So severe were they.

The Acharya one day announced his intention to hold a test for concentration. He asked all his pupils among the Kauravas and the Pandavas to be ready with their bows and arrows. "There is a bird perched on that branch of the tree," he said pointing his finger in the particular direction, "and I want each of you to shoot the eye of the bird. Each of you will have your chance as your name will be called."

When the royal children saw the bird in the tree, they all became anxious to go through the test. To them the test appeared to be easy, even simple. What was there in shooting the eye of a bird, they argued among themselves. Had they not shot great animals? They all got their equipment ready. They wondered who would be called first. Many doubted whether they would be called at all, for the eye of the bird might not remain for a target after the first or the second prince had gone through the test. There was only one small eye of one small bird within their view and there were so many princes ready with their bows and arrows. Anxiously they waited for the great Acharya to call their names.

Suddenly the Acharya called the name of Duryodhana. The Kaurava Prince became glad for getting the first chance. Being well prepared, Duryodhana jumped forward, bow and arrow in hand

and stood beside the teacher. "Now my dear Duru", Dronacharya said, "get ready to shoot. Take aim at the eye of the bird in the tree." The Kaurava Prince steadied himself put the arrow to the string of his bow and pointing it in the desired direction, took aim. He waited for Dronacharya to say "Shoot".

If Duryodhana was impatient to shoot and the other princes were equally impatient to be called for the test, the Acharya was in no mood to be hurried about. He was never in a hurry and at present it appeared he was unusually leisurely. For this was a test in which the teacher, too, had his part to play. Moreover the test was for concentration and not to decide how quickly one could shoot the arrow.

"I think you are now ready," said the Acharya at length to Duryodhana, "but tell me if you can see the bird properly. What else can you see? How many of the Princes gathered here are you in a position to see?"

"I am able to see the bird on that tree very well," replied Duryodhana promptly, "and I can also see other birds in the same tree. That is not all. Even some birds in the nearby tree are within my view. I can clearly see all my brothers assembled here. I could tell you many more things which I am in a position to see at present."

Duryodhana felt satisfied with himself because he was under the impression that he had given a good answer to the question. He was anticipating a word of praise from the teacher and that final order "Shoot".

Dronacharya, however, was in no mood to oblige his pupil. After all, this was a test. "I have heard you," the Acharya said to Duryodhana. "Now you may turn and come back. I don't want you to shoot. What I wanted to know was your power of concentration."

As Duryodhana turned back taking out the arrow from the string of the bow, he was greatly disappointed. The other princes waiting to be called were very surprised; they wondered what had gone wrong with Duryodhana's taking aim at the target. Still they waited there in the same anxious mood, for the word of the teacher had to be obeyed. The test had to go on.

The next name to be called was Bheema's. The hefty Pandava Prince came running forward and stood before Dronacharya. He readied himself with the bow and the arrow.

"My dear Bheema," Dronacharya commanded, "Take aim at the eye of the bird in that tree, but tell me before shooting all that you are able to see besides the target."

"I can see so many things," replied Bheema, after hastily pulling the arrow and taking aim. "There are so many birds in the many trees around. Some cows are grazing in the fields over there. From a branch of another tree, some monkeys are jumping about. And I can also see you and my brothers sitting there on the ground. There are still many other things I am in a position to see. I could describe them all if you order me to."

"That is enough," said Dronacharya, "Now you need not shoot. Go back and sit with your brothers."

Bheema came back as dejected as was Duryodhana before him. The other princes now became a little uneasy, slowly realising that there was more in the test than met the eye.

Like this, one by one, many Pandava and Kaurava Princes were called, but none was able to pass the test. They were all able to see many things besides the target while taking aim, and all of them were ordered to come back without shooting.

Dronacharya now called Arjuna for the test. The young Pandava Prince came and stood beside the Acharya with measured steps; there was no excitement in his movements. There was a poised and steady air about him. Standing firmly on his feet, Arjuna put his arrow to the bow and pulling it well took aim at the eye of the bird on the tree. As his eyes got fixed on the target, Arjuna forgot everything else. He could see nothing but the target.

"Are you ready ?" Dronacharya asked Arjuna.

"Yes *Gurudev*," replied Arjuna. "If you want I could shoot. Or, if you so order me, I could come back. I am only waiting for your word."

"I am glad to hear your answer. There are some questions I should like to ask you. Your success in this test depends on your answers to them. The question I am going to ask should have been clear to you by now. Tell me, what else do you see apart from the eye of the bird ?"

The other Princes expected to hear this time also the same kind of answer given first by Duryodhana and then by Bheema. As it appeared to them, what else could one do but see the things which happen to be before one's eyes? It seemed to them that the great Acharya was unnecessarily complicating matters and ridiculing them by ordering them to return without shooting. Dronacharya was a great teacher, they had been told, but now they began to wonder whether his greatness depended on confusing things and not accepting straight answers to straight questions.

Arjuna came forth with an answer so different from that which the other princes expected. They were startled to hear him say: "My dear Sir! I can see nothing except the bird. I cannot even tell you whether the bird is on the bough or on the ground. Everything else has disappeared from my view on my taking aim at the target.

Dronacharya was pleased with the answer. But still he put one more question to Arjuna with the sole purpose of making things clearer to the other Princes. His method was to teach through practical examples. He asked: "Arjuna! Till now you were looking at the bird and so you could not see anything else. I think, at present, you are in a position to see different animals, birds, trees and many other things. Could you tell me all that you are able to see?"

Arjuna's reply was intriguing to the waiting princes. "Sir! Now I can't even see the body of the bird. All that I that I can see now is the eye which is to be my target. If you are to ask me whether the eye belongs to a bird or to a beast, I am not in a position to reply as I see only the eye and nothing but the eye."

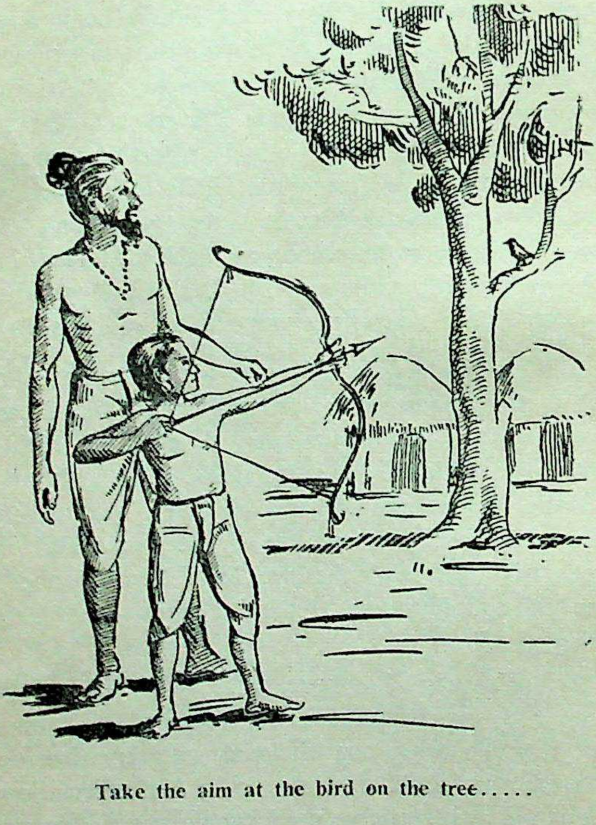
This time, too, Arjuna's reply pleased the venerable Acharya. He cast a glance at the waiting Princes and noted that they were slowly beginning to understand the meaning of concentration for which the present test had been conducted. "Arjuna!" Dronacharya began once again, "I am satisfied with your answer. But there is still something more I would like to know from you. You tell me, you don't know where the bird is sitting, you don't even know the shape or the colour of the bird. Then how could you shoot at its eye? "Besides, if you can see other things now, then name them quickly also."

Still Arjuna was steady and his reply was short much to the amazement of the Princes. "Sir! I can't answer any of your questions. I can see nothing but the eye which I have to shoot. Not only that. I feel as if that eye and myself have become one. There exists no yawning gap between me and my target. My sight and the eye have become one in terms of concentration. At this moment, I know nothing else."

Arjuna's pointed answer more than satisfied the venerable Dronacharya. For a moment he almost forgot himself, being overwhelmed with joy that one of his students could measure up to his expectations. What would a true teacher need but the most endearing satisfaction that there was one at least amongst his pupils, who could be reckoned worthy of the labour undertaken for him? The actual act of shooting now was not necessary, but still he had to go through it just to drive the point home to the other Princes.

"Shoot !"

Sprang the arrow.



Take the aim at the bird on the tree.....

The eye and only the eye, had been shot. The head and the body of the bird were intact. For a casual observer it appeared as though the bird was still there, perched on the bough as before. Only a minute glance revealed that the eye of the bird was missing.

"Wonderful ! Wonderful !!" shouted the brother Princes, all of whom ran to Arjuna and lifted him up and carried him for a while on their shoulders out of sheer joy.

In the end, Dronacharya announced to the Kaurava and the Pandava Princes that Arjuna was the only winner of the test. He rounded off the day's proceedings with the following remarks : "As I want you all to know, concentration is a great power in life; you could win anything with this power. Concentration is possible only through a healthy body and a healthy mind. When I say healthy mind, what I mean is a mind which is able to exercise perfect control over the senses and emotions. Then you need to develop faith in yourself; you must have confidence in yourself to be successful. This comes only through practice over and over again. Finally, you need faith in the Supreme Power that rules this universe and governs all our activities. That alone could invest you with an equanimous attitude towards life. All these factors go to make perfect concentration."

We thus see in the present story that Arjuna emerges as the only winner, thanks to concentration. While the other Princes were equally proficient in archery, it was in concentration that Arjuna excelled, and that made all the difference. Concentration is a great power which is within the scope of everyone to develop. No matter what the goal, the word Impossible does not exist for concentration. But the great tragedy is that in the case of many of us, concentration is just in its rudimentary stage. Whatever little of it is acquired, is handicapped by fear, worry and haste. It is only in rare cases that one sees the real scope of concentration. There is, however, nothing which prevents one from developing one's concentration, no matter how old one may be. To begin with, all that is needed is a genuine desire to get the best out of one's life, and that desire, will guide one along the high road of concentration.

3rd STORY

DHRUVA

THE POLE STAR OF SEEKERS

Dhruva was the son of King Uttanpada and Queen Suneeti. The King had a second wife named Suruchi, from whom also he had a son by name Uttama. Suneeti was the elder Queen and Suruchi was the younger. Because of her youth and beauty the King had a great attraction for Suruchi and he was all the time dominated by her. True, the King loved both his sons equally, but he dared not show his love for Dhruva in the presence of Suruchi for fear of offending her. Suneeti and her son Dhruva had to live in a separate palace, while Suruchi with her son Uttama, and the King stayed in the main palace. Dhruva being the elder of the two sons had the first claim to the throne. He was also taught good manners by his mother Suneeti and he was a very gentle, sweet child—loving and loveable.

Once Dhruva and Uttama were playing in the King's palace. Seated on his throne the King fondly watched them playing. All of a sudden Dhruva in a playful mood came to the King, climbed on to his lap and sat there. The king was so pleased that he lovingly fondled the sweet child. At that moment Queen Suruchi came and seeing the King fondling Dhruva became furious. She was not able to say anything to her husband. She, therefore, made Dhruva the target of her wrath. Rushing to the King, she pushed down young Dhruva from his lap and shouted : "You little fool, you can't sit on the King's lap as you are not born of me. You are not sufficiently blessed by the Almighty to be so fortunate. If you desire to achieve that place on the King's lap, go and pray to God. Please Him with your service and devotion, so that you can get His blessings and a boon to be born of a mother like me. Then alone you may cherish a desire of getting such a place."

Dhruva was too young to understand the meaning of all that had taken place. But, nevertheless, he felt greatly insulted. Sad and sullen he came back to his mother Suneeti. He sat brooding in a corner, and would not speak a single word. His mother caressed him and tried to know from him what had happened, but it was of no use. Then she enquired from the attendants where Dhruva had gone and what was the matter. Thus she came to know that Dhruva had been to the palace, that the jealous Suruchi had pushed him off the King's lap and spoken harsh words, to him and that the boy had felt so deeply insulted that he avoided meeting or talking to anybody.

Suneeti then sat near him, caressed him and spoke to him in a gentle and soft manner. She told him that every action of a human being is bound to have a result. Similarly every result has a cause. What is happening at a given time is due to some cause in the past. If what happens at present is painful and sorrowful, the cause must be some mistake committed in the past. So these mistakes must be corrected, and if the present actions happen to be truthful and good, their result in the future would bring peace and happiness. Ignorance is the root of mistaken behaviour. The way to get rid of ignorance is through meditation and concentration, undertaken by sitting in a place of solitude and offering prayers to the Almighty.

When the Almighty is pleased by devoted and continuous prayers, He gives the light of knowledge to the devotee. Then alone does the devotee understand entire creation and the rules governing it. Such an enlightened soul would not do any harm to anyone since he realises that doing harm to anything outside one's self is nothing but doing harm to one's own self as all creation is but one. His actions then become pure, unselfish, harmless and therefore wise; and as a result he enjoys constant happiness and peace. Then besides the King's lap or the throne, there remains nothing in this world or the next which he cannot achieve. Though his stepmother Suruchi had insulted him by pushing him away and speaking harsh words to him, she had nevertheless told him an all-time truth. Dhruva should, therefore, act on her advice and meditate and offer prayers to the Almighty whose blessings alone would enable him to get whatever he wanted. He must also give up his hatred for his step-mother and look at her not as a step-mother but as a wife of his father. Those who hated and gave pain to others invoked the displeasure of the Almighty and ruined themselves. Selfless devotion to the Almighty would fulfil any cherished desire of a devotee.

Dhruva was feeling very sore because of Suruchi's insult. The advice of his mother Suneeti made him act with determination. However he wondered what he would ask God for if God were pleased ? Perhaps a place from where nobody could push him away as his step-mother had done. He then told Suneeti that he was determined to go to the forest for meditation. Dhruva was at that time only five years of age, and Suneeti was very worried over her young son's decision.

At that time there emerged on the scene the God-sage Narada. He enquired after the health of the two and hearing about Dhruva's decision, he began to persuade the young lad to abandon the idea. He said : "Oh dear child, you are just five years old. This is the time to enjoy sweet dishes to your heart's content. Play different games with your playmates. Wear beautiful clothes and have a good time. Insult or honor is an idea good enough for the grown--ups, but a boy like you should not be troubled by such ideas. You are the first claimant to the king's throne. Rule the earth and enjoy your life. Then when you get old and find yourself incapable of enjoying the worldly pleasures, devote some time for meditation and prayers to the Almighty, so that in a few more years you may get

God's blessing."

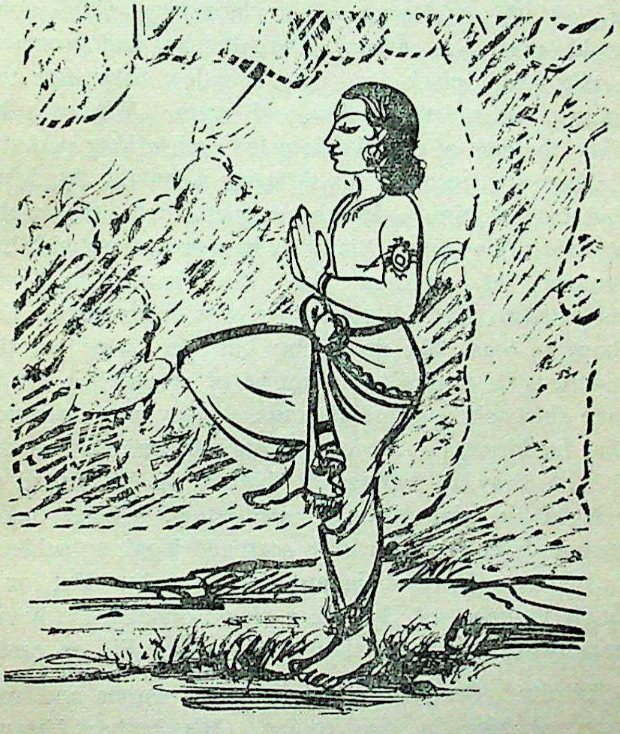
Dhruva replied : "Oh Narada, what you say is precious enough and worth-while for any average persons in this world. But I am the son of King Uttanpada. A warrior's blood courses through my veins. My heart is torn by my step-mother's insults, so the advice you give has no effect on me. Oh God-sage, I will not have peace of mind till I have obtained the favours of the Almighty. I am determined to go through the process of meditation and purification which mother has explained to me. You are well-versed, and indeed you are an authority on the matter. Oh revered one, I now request you to guide me along the Path, which, once and for all, I have made up my mind, to follow."

Narada was only testing the determination of the boy. Being assured that he would follow the Path steadfastly, Narada began to explain many secrets regarding the practice of meditation to young Dhruva. He then told Dhruva to go to a solitary place in the deep forests and meditate. Dhruva, whose determination had turned absolutely rock-like by now, respectfully saluted the God-sage Narada and his mother Suneeti. Having received their blessings, he moved out of the kingdom and came to a forest known as Madhuban and selected a quiet place for his meditation.

Narada now went to King Uttanpada. The news of Dhruva having moved to the forests, had reached the king. He felt guilty that, in a way, he was responsible for this. None could imagine how a boy of just five years could go to a forest and stay there without harm from the wild beasts of the jungle. It was still harder to imagine that the boy could settle down to concentrate and meditate. Narada, however, assuaged the king's fears with kind words and told him that Dhruva had gone to the forest only after being throughly guided by him. The Sage had blessed him and, moreover, he was sure to have the protection of the Almighty, for the law was that no seeker was left uncared for. The king, therefore, need entertain no fears on Dhruva's account, and God-willing, Dhruva would soon come back to the king after accomplishing this task.

In Madhuban, Dhruva settled down to the practice of concentration. In the first month he ate fruits once in three days. In the second month he took only the fallen leaves of trees once in six days. Then in the third month he only took water once in nine days and in the fourth month he just maintained himself on air inhaled once in twelve days. His aim was so stead-fast, his urge so intense and his practice so thorough, that by the fifth month Dhruva had achieved supreme concentration of the mind, as a result of which he could identify himself with the entire Universe. All knowledge and secrets of the Universe were now open to him. The Almighty then appeared before him. Dhruva was still meditating with his eyes closed, feeling the power of the entire Universe within his heart. Suddenly he felt as if his heart was getting emptied and he slowly opened his eyes. The Almighty had purposely taken away the power of his heart so that Dhruva could come out of his meditation and behold Him in a human form.

The Almighty showered blessings on Dhruva and said: "My dear child, may it happen as you wish. I am pleased to grant you this boon. Now you should go back to your father. Your step-borther Uttama will be killed while on a hunting expedition. Your step-mother Suruchi will be overwhelmed with grief and she will ascend the funeral pyre and commit



The state of supreme concentration

suicide. You will succeed to the throne and rule the Kingdom for thirty-six thousand years and then come to my abode and unite with me." So saying the Almighty in the human form dissappeared.

Dhruva began to wonder what was the meaning of all this. He wanted a place from where none could push him away. The Almighty had promised a permanent place in His abode only after the passage of thirty-six thousand years. Why was he given the rule of the kingdom for such a long period? He began to recollect his thoughts when the Almighty had blessed him. He then remembered that while receiving the boon "may it happen as you wish", a thought of revenge for the insult he was subjected to, by his step-mother, was in his mind. The thought was his, no doubt; but to wipe out the ill-effects of that single thought of revenge, it would take thirty-six thousand years. He now repented that he forgot the advice of his mother and Narada, to cast away all feelings of hatred, if he desired to achieve his aim through meditation. What takes thousands of years for even seasoned Yogis to achieve, was before Dhruva in just five months. But for a single thought of hatred, a single default, the heavy penalty was thirty-six thousand years of life on earth.

Dhruva then returned to his father and was crowned king in due course. His bother Uttama went out hunting in the Gardens of the God of Wealth (Kubera) and was killed by the servants of that god. Suruchi became mad with grief and burnt herself on a pile of wood. Then Dhruva went to fight with the God of Wealth to avenge Uttama's death. Lord Brahma appeared before him and persuaded him to leave that mad course. He advised Dhruva to return to his kingdom and rule in a wise and just manner.

At the end of his rule, Dhruva again sat in meditation at Badrikashram. This time his Samadhi was without any blemish, and he was bodily taken to the abode of the Almighty to remain there permanently. Thus it came to pass that whenever anyone pointed his finger at the everpresent Pole Star, always in its place, with none daring to push it off, perpetually shining, it was said that there was Dhruva, the young child who became a Pole Star of Seekers of all time.

4th STORY

PRAHLAD

THE CHILD WHO WAS OLD ENOUGH TO PROVE GOD'S OMNIPRESENCE

Long long ago there lived a mighty king by name, Hrinyakashyapu. He was so powerful that he had defeated all the other kings of the day. Then he turned his attention to the gods and within a short time claimed victory over them too. He was the proud recipient of a divine boon. According to the boon, nobody could defeat Hrinyakashyapu. nobody could kill him—neither man, nor animal; he could not be killed either during the day or at night; and lastly nobody could kill him either inside a structure or outside. The boon was a perfect protection to the king. It invested him with a rare sense of power. He soon became mighty proud of his own superiority over all human and heavenly beings. But as such power and pride never allows one to remain quiet, the king proclaimed his order, that he, and he alone should be worshipped by one and all throughout the kingdom. It was made clear at the same time that anyone found worshipping the traditional gods and goddesses, would be severely dealt with. The king despatched his soldiers to different parts of the kingdom to enforce the new order. As soon as his couriers brought the happy news that all the people were wholeheartedly obeying his orders, the king stroked his beard with a great feeling of satisfaction and amply rewarded the couriers.

In course of time, king Hrinyakashyapu became the happy father of a son. Naming the child Prahlad, the king called for celebrations all over his kingdom. Hrinyakashyapu naturally looked forward to the day when his son too would be worshipped along with him by his loyal subjects. What else could a mighty, arrogant king think of blinded as he was with his own importance and superiority?

One day, when he was only nine years old, Prahlad found a potter-woman in a remote village, repeating the words, "Ram, Ram, Ram!" By now he had come to know that taking the name of any gods happened to be an offence under his father's rule. He, therefore, questioned the woman about her action. The potter-woman explained thus :

> "Excuse me, my Lord! Here is a cat crying frantically as you can see for yourself. You may also see the burning fire in the outer yard. I made the fire to bake my pots, without knowing that in one of the pots there are the kittens of the cat. So the mother is crying

herself hoarse for the safety of her offspring. Since I can do nothing to save the kittens now, I am calling upon God Rama. I am sure God Rama will certainly come to my assistance and save the little kittens."

Young Prahlad could not share the poor woman's faith in the power of God to save the kittens from the fire. But he appreciated her concern for the kittens; like her, he too, wanted them to be saved. As the woman refused to put out the fire, since it would result in her losing all her pots, he let her pray to the God of her choice. He promised, however, to drop in on the next day see for himself the efficacy of her prayers.

The next morning, Prahlad got up early and hurried to the place of the potter-woman. He was all eagerness to know what had happened to the kittens. A miracle awaited him on the scene of the happenings of the previous day. He saw with his own eyes how one particular pot had been left untouched by fire while all the others were duly baked. The woman took out the particular pot and opened its lid. Inside it were the kittens, all alive and fresh. To Prahlad's young and innocent mind, nothing more was needed to convince him of the wonderful power of God's name. Then and there, he, too, started taking Rama's name. He went to the palace, with "Ram, Ram" on his lips.

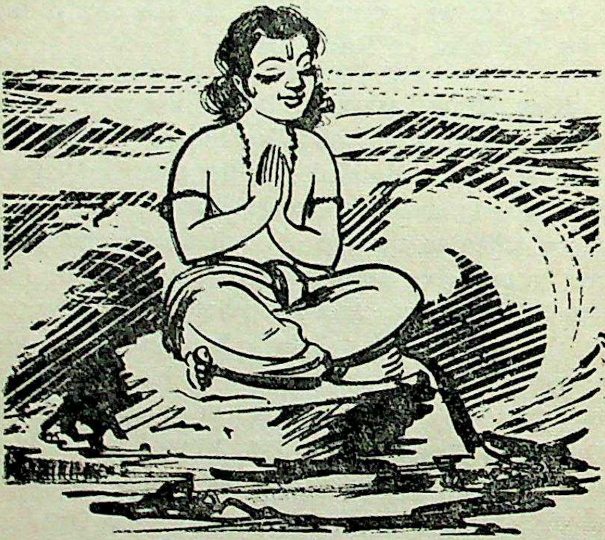
When his servants heard their young master repeating the name of Ram, they begged of him not to do so, but Prahlad ordered all of them to repeat the name because Ram had greater power than any earthly king—Ram was God.

He went to his mother repeating the name of God Ram. He insisted on his mother repeating the word "Ram, Ram" like him. Thus the young boy went on converting whomsoever he met to his way of praying. He was never silent. He was always found taking the name of Ram, Ram!

King Hrinyakashyapu, who by now had heard enough of his son Prahlad's conquests with the aid of Rama's name, decided that the time had come to put an end to such mischief. He gave orders that the boy be taken to the top of a mountain and pushed down from there. Huge boulders were to be rolled down from the same spot immediately thereafter, so that the boy should definitely be crushed to death. The proud king was prepared to lose his son who now appeared to be the source of much embarrassment, even mischief. The king wanted to nip in the but what was threatening to be a challenge to his authority.

The servants took Prahlad to the top of a mountain and pushed him down just as they were instructed. They then rolled huge stones down the hill. But the boy somehow did not die. Happily repeating the words 'Ram, Ram' he came to the palace and stood before the king who was amazed that Prahlad had evaded death!

The next day, the king ordered that Prahlad be tied with a rope to a huge stone and thrown into the sea. The servants carried out the king's order without, however, achieving the desired result. The huge stone to which Pralad was tied did not sink in the water; it floated instead towards the shore. Soon young Prahlad landed safely on shore, with the words 'Ram, Ram' still on his lips!



Meditation amidst the waves

Nothing is more irritating to a tyrant than to have his well laid plans thwarted, that too by a mere child of nine years. Such a thing makes him desperate and the great fear haunts him that the Invisible is making a mockery of his power. This was the case with King Hrinyakashyapu who now lost no time in hatching yet another plan to get his son Prahlad killed. This time he ordered that the boy be thrown before a furious elephant. The mad beast was sure to crush the boy under its huge legs, so the king calculated.

The calculations of the king once again went wrong. Instead of crushing Prahlad under its feet, the elephant lifted the lad with its trunk and placed him on its massive back, as if to give him a joy-ride. The king found it hard to believe that some inexplicable force was rescuing his young son Prahlad. Here was a boy who merely repeated the name of Ram and even a mad elephant became subdued. The king was beside himself with rage that his own little son was proving more than a match for him. He now remembered that his sister Holika might be useful to him. He immediately sent for her.

The king's sister Holika had secret powers. Even fire would not burn her. As desired by her brother, she stepped into burning fire carrying in her arms young Prahlad. She got burnt within a short while, her secret powers notwithstanding, but Prahlad was miraculously saved. He merrily walked out of the fire, Ram Ram continuously on his lips.

The King now decided , to kill Prahlad with his own hands. Carrying his unsheathed sword in one hand, he thundered to Prahlad, "Where is your Ram ? I want to see if you can show him !" Calmly Prahlad replied : "Ram is everywhere, in your body, mind and soul; in my body, mind and soul; is Ram !"

Hrinyakashapu was in no mood for a quiet discourse on the presence or absence of God Ram. Shouting "Let your Ram protect you if he is anywhere", the king dashed forward as if to thrust his shining sword into the neck of his own little son. Prahlad just stood there without even trying to run away, with nothing to protect him save his "Ram, Ram". Here was brute force giving battle to Spiritual Power which knew no defeat. The father had become mad with fury, but the son was tranquil beyond words. This was the moment of reckoning for the king, who imagined himself to be invincible because of the boon.

Even before the sword could so much as touch Prahlad, there emerged on the scene a ferocious Being with the body of a man, but the head of a lion, — neither man nor beast. With bloodshot eyes, the Man-Lion seized Hrinyakashyapu, made for the threshold nearby, and settled down to tear him limb by limb. Before the holy-terror, symbolised by the Man-Lion, no boon could save the King. The killer was a Man-Lion (neither man nor animal), the time was twilight (neither day nor night), and the place was the threshold (neither inside a structure nor outside). How wonderfully had the Divine contrived things !

Thus ends the story of young Prahlad. His age at that time could not have been anything more than ten years; he was not even a Matriculate student by our present standards. What an achievement ! How could he face his father in a very non-voilent manner ? What was the Power he represented ? Such questions bear consideration. Whether one gets proper answers or not, it is worth remembering that the Power which came to the rescue of Prahlad is within each one of us. Indeed, Prahlad is not an exception, but a rule.

5th STORY

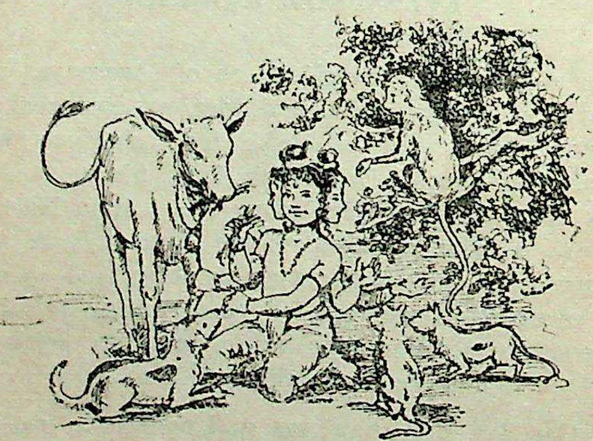
DATTATREYA

HE LEARNED FROM EVERYTHING—EVEN FROM INSECTS

Dattatreya was the eldest son of Anasooya. He was very humble, quiet and wise, as compared to other children. For a child, his behaviour was notably restrained. He always kept his eyes and ears open, for he learned many things from Nature. It was a common sight to see Dattatreya in the company of dogs, cats, stags, monkeys and so on. By observing animal life he studied many valuable lessons so necessary for a seeker after spiritual wisdom. Verily he was a child of Nature.

One day Dattatreya was walking near a palace in a pleasant mood. The king saw him from inside and was impressed by his dignified bearing, coupled with a supernatural brightness about his face. Himself on the spiritual path, the king could at once know that here was a disciple of some great teacher. Immediately he sent for Dattatreya and expressed his desire to know the great teacher at whose feet the king thought the boy had studied. The king further said that he would deem it a great pleasure to be introduced to the wise teacher.

Dattatreya was indeed glad to meet in the king a fellow-seeker. Much as he would have liked to please the king, he could not help revealing the truth that he had had more than one teacher, and that most of his teachers were not human beings. "I learned from animals, birds, insects, and so on," said Dattatreya. "I have found in all twenty-four teachers since my childhood, and still I am searching for more."



He was great enough to learn from birds and animals

On hearing that the boy had twenty-four teachers and that most of them were either animals or birds, the king thought that the boy was playing a joke upon him. Dattatreya assured the king that he really meant what he said and came forth with the names of all his twenty-four teachers. The list he presented to the king was as follows : 1) Land 2) Water 3) Fire 4) Air 5) Sky 6) Moon 7) Sun 8) Pigeon 9) Python 10) Sea 11) Fire-fly 12) Butter-fly 13) Bee 14) Elephant 15) Stag 16) Fish 17) Prostitute 18) Kuru bird 19) Child 20) Maiden 21) Snake 22) Artisan 23) Spider 24) Bhringi bird. Dattatreya proceeded to explain to the king the peculiar circumstances under which each teacher had been chosen.

Be Tolerant—like the Land

His first teacher was the great Mother Earth. If anybody either abused or praised him, Dattatreya never became excited or pleased. This nature he learnt from the Land. He had been observing that though people used to dig, burn, break and do many more such acts to the land, the latter never became angry or excited. In spite of all these things the land continued to produce fruits, roots, water and diamonds. Because it taught him how to be benevolent and forebearing, Dattatreya made Land his first teacher.

Be Clear and Cool—like Water

From land Dattatreya moved to Water in so far as lessons for living were concerned. He always liked to be clear and cool. He had seen that these qualities made the body and mind fresh, calm and composed : a state in which the mind could rise up in prayer. It was Water which had taught him these, and so he made it his teacher.

Keep Nothing for the Morrow—like the Fire

His next teacher was Fire. One day Dattatreya saw some children sitting around a wayside fire and throwing twigs and faggots into it. The fire burned everything, keeping nothing for the morrow. The fire was engaged in the present activity and was the least concerned about the future. From this Dattatreya learnt how not to bother about the future. Whatever one could get by way of food on any day, one should be satisfied with. A day's requirements formed the measure of his needs and the future never worried him. He owed this lesson to the Fire.

Be on the Move—Like the Air

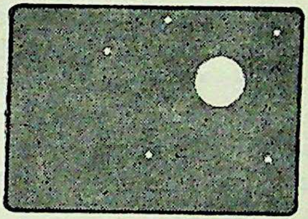
He then switched on to Air. What could air teach him? He found that air never stayed in any one place, and it always kept moving. Similarly Dattatreya too always liked to be on the move, never staying at any one place for a length of time, so that no bonds of attachment could be formed. Attachment resulted in a seeker dropping an anchor and ceasing to proceed further on the spiritual path. Thus it was a great obstacle to progress. He owed this lesson—of always being on the move—to the Air.

Be detached—like the Sky

As he moved from place to place under the blue, broad Sky, the great lesson which the latter held for seekers became clear to Dattatreya. The sky was with the earth, but at the same time it was never a part of the earth. Similarly, the Spirit was very necessary for the functioning of the Body-Mind complex. But the Spirit was all the while a little apart from the latter. Like the sky in relation to the earth, the Spirit was with the body, but never of the body. This attitude—of being disinterested and not being involved with the immediate—the sky taught him.

Remain in one Condition—like the Moon

While he was on the subject of the Sky, could the Moon be forgotten? How could the cool and composed nature of the moon, escape the notice of Dattatreya? The moon was always in one condition; it never became big or small, though the shadow of the earth often showed it up in varying sizes. Similarly, the events of life cast their own shadows, but the Spirit remained the same,—always full, always calm and unperturbed. He learnt this valuable lesson from the Moon.

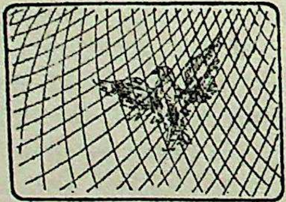


Give out to Others—like the Sun

One could never learn anything from the moon without being made aware of one's indebtedness to the Sun. How could one afford not to learn from the Sun? From the seas the sun drew water and transformed it into clouds, which in due course poured as rain on the parched earth. Who could forget the life—giving light which came from the sun? Never keeping anything to oneself, and giving everything to others, was the noble message of the sun. Dattatreya made it his life's objective to spread all the knowledge he gathered and to keep no secrets for himself. His sole concern was that others should benefit from him. This was indeed a noble lesson from the Sun.

Do not be Attached—like Pigeons

Realising early in life that one should never cease to learn, Dattatreya carried on his search for more and more teachers. He was always observing, and he never missed any incident from which he could draw some lessons. While walking one day, under the bright sun, on a jungle path, he saw a pigeon caught in a net, which had been spread there by some hunter. However much it tried, the bird could not get free of the net. Watching this scene were some birds on a bough nearby, obviously the relatives of the one caught in the net. The winged witnesses cried themselves hoarse, giving encouragement to their unfortunate relative to struggle hard and get free of the net. When it became clear that there was no escape for the one in the net, the mother bird on the bough became frantic and herself jumped into the net.

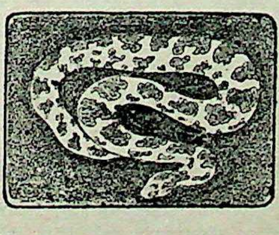


She was soon followed by the father bird and the other relatives. Those who had been encouraging the first victim to try and get free of the net had themselves chosen to become prisoners and partners in distress. Soon the hunter appeared on the scene and caught them all.

The scene was so gripping that it made Dattatreya think deeply on the ups and downs of life. Why did the mother bird jump into the net even after seeing her son struggling in it ? Why did the other birds follow her ? Was it not attachment to a relative in distress which made the birds behave as they did ? Was it not attachment which made them blind to reason ? And what did attachment give them but imprisonment in the net of a hunter ? The lesson was clear to Dattatreya. From the pigeons he learnt that attachment was the source of all misery. Thus it was that he listed the pigeon amongst his teachers.

Do not be Bothered about Food—like the Python

Dattatreya saw a python one day, lying idly in a forest. You and I would be struck with terror at the sight of a python and would make for safety in



no time. With Dattatreya, matters were different. He observed the python for days together, and found that it never went out in search of food, but lay always in the same place. If some animal came within its coil, the python devoured it; if not, it existed only on air. Dattatreya found here a good lesson to be learnt. From that day he stopped bothering about food; he made it a habit to be satisfied with whatever food he got on any day. On the day he got no food he was satisfied to live on air just as the python. For this lesson the python was given a place in his list of teachers.

Avoid changes—Like the Sea

The lesson he learned from the python was still fresh in his mind, when Dattatreya stood one day on the seashore, viewing the blue spectacle spread before him. At a little distance from where he stood, a great river was flowing into the sea. Did the sea ever change because so many rivers joined it? Dattatreya asked himself. The answer was obvious. From the sea he wanted to imbibe the quality of keeping oneself in one condition, come what may. In this way the Sea became one of his teachers.

Do Not Be Enticed By Attraction of Beauty—Like Fire-flies

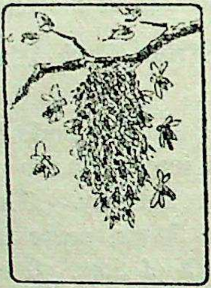
What caused changes in one's mind? This question haunted Dattatreya's mind after he had imbibed the lesson from the sea, and as he moved from place to place. He closely watched each day's happenings for an answer. It was after some time that he found the answer and this time his teacher was the fire-fly. One day while he was reading in the light of a lamp, some fire-flies flew up to the flame and were burnt. Even after seeing this, more and more fire-flies continued coming to the flame only to get burnt. What attracted the flies to the flame? Here then was the answer to his query. Attraction for a thing of beauty caused changes and disturbances in the mind, even to the extent of making it unaware of the consequences. The lesson was now clear: Beware of the attraction of Beauty. This was indeed a valuable lesson, and so the fire-fly was given a prominent place in the list of his teachers.

Gather a Little From Each Place—Like the Butterfly

The instance of fire-flies made Dattatreya aware of another variety of insects known for its movements among flowers—the butterfly. The butterfly always flits from flower to flower, never staying on any one flower for any length of time. It collects just a little honey from the flower—just as much as it can during its brief stay—and flits to another flower and so on. The wandering seeker that he was, Dattatreya noted in this an important lesson. Like the butterfly he too wanted to collect a little food from a house—just what he needed to satisfy his hunger at one time—and not to remain in the same place for a second or a third meal. This way he became a burden to none, and besides he was able to preserve his sense of independence. He owed this lesson to the butterfly which he elevated to the rank of one of his teachers.

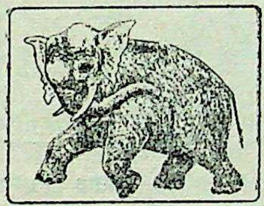
Do Not Hoard—Like Bees

From butterflies to Bees is a natural development in that both are associated with flowers. An incident one day brought home to Dattatreya the realisation that there was something valuable to be learnt from the bees. The incident was limited to his seeing a man going up a tree and collecting from the topmost branch a bee-hive well-stocked with honey. What the bees had been collecting for many days, they had lost in no time. The poor bees swarmed round the man for some time, some may have stung him too, but nevertheless they were the losers. Having laboured for so many days collecting honey, they were poorer in the end. What was the worth of any activity if it makes one miserable in the end? From this Dattatreya drew a lesson, that hoarding was the root cause of all misery. One remains peaceful so long as one has about enough for the time being. Once he begins to collect, he invites upon himself misery and sorrow. Don't you think this is an important lesson? No wonder the bees too became Dattatreya's teachers.



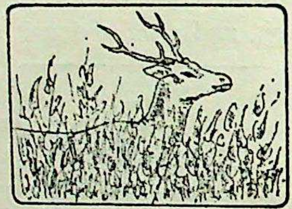
Do Not Ignore the Pitfalls of Sex-Attraction—Like the Elephant

It always happens that even after a valuable lesson has been learnt from an incident, certain other details not necessarily relevant at the time also linger in the mind for some days. After he had drawn the lesson from the bees, Dattatreya 'should have wondered how the entire activities of the bee-hive centred round the queen-bee. For her all worked, and all were attracted by her. The thought process should have naturally brought in its train the subject of sex-attraction : the female of a species always attracts the male. It was while he was seized of this thought pattern, that he saw a group of hunters digging a huge pit, and after giving it a false covering placed an artificial female elephant on top. The hunters were hiding at some distance. Soon there came that way a mighty male elephant. It was so fascinated by the female elephant that in a trice it was at the bottom of the huge pit together with what it imagined to be the female. Now the hunters were ready to take over. In its sex attraction, the male elephant did not spare even a moment, to verify whether the female elephant before it was real or not. From the day Dattatreya was clear in his mind on the subject : Sex attraction was a great obstacle for a seeker. For this lesson he made the elephant his teacher.



Do Not Be Swept off by Any Attraction— like the Stag

Sex attraction was not the only thing one had to guard against. There were other attractions too, which paralysed the senses momentarily, and pushed one down the slope. This knowledge came to Dattatreya through an incident in a thick forest. A musician was seen—so it seemed to Dattatreya at first—wasting his talent amidst the thick growth in the forest. There was nobody to hear his music, let alone appreciate it. But the musician did appear to be in his right senses, and thus it was obvious that there ought to be some purpose behind his performance. After a short while Dattatreya saw a stag emerge from out of the thick growth, and move straight to the source of the music, hypnotized as it was by the melody. The musician now ceased his performance and got hold of the stag and dragged it home. The lesson this incident conveyed was clear : Let no attraction have such hold on you as to make you lose your balance of mind.

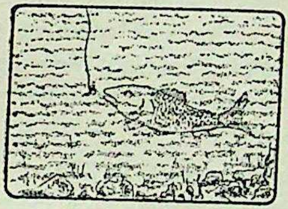


Do Not Be tempted by Tasty Food—Like the Fish

Looking closely what is an attraction but a desire to satisfy the demand of a sense organ? Call it attraction or temptation or what you will, it boils down to one thing : Some particular sense organ is making a powerful demand for greater gratification.

When a man yields to temptation, one invites on oneself misery and grief, for the simple reason that Desire by its very nature can never be positive.

Dattatreya's thoughts were on these lines when he saw one more incident similar to the one regarding the stag. In the present instance, he saw some men on the river bank casting into the water bait for fish.



Naturally the hooks had been concealed in tasty food-particles. The attraction of the tasty food was irresistible to the fish and that precisely spelt their undoing. Instead of the fish feeding on the food particles, the man on the river bank were planning to feed on the fish. What lesson could be drawn from this incident? Dattatreya found in this an unforgettable lesson for day-to-day practice: Be satisfied with what you get for food, and never yield to the temptation of tasty food. Dattatreya made it his life's habit never to be bothered in the least about his food requirements. He was satisfied with whatever he got, and there ended the matter of food.

Benefit from Dejection—Like the Prostitute

Is dejection not the other side of attraction? We have seen so far many incidents regarding attraction, and we have seen Dattatreya cautioning us against all forms of attraction. In the present incident we find him exhorting us to profit from dejection. It was all about a prostitute. She was standing at a door waiting for a lover who could be her client for the night. When nobody turned up for a long while, the prostitute retreated into the inner room, perhaps to attend to some household chores. After some time she again came out to the door, and waited there as before. Still nobody turned up and again she went inside the house. This was repeated throughout the night till day-break. Her night-long vigil had been in vain; despite her figure and her charms, no one had knocked at her door.

At day-break a great feeling of dejection came over her. She was dejected with everything, she was dejected with herself. The whole night had slipped by, and she had ben waiting and waiting. She did not know for whom she was waiting. The sound of approaching footsteps, the knock on the door . . . these things were not witnessed throughout the night. What a colossal waste of precious life—the realisation dawned on her in a sudden flash. Had she turned her mind Godward, what a world of difference would there have been ? Her eyes were opened now. Then and there she decided to change her ways and devote all her time to the worship of God. In due course she became a realised soul. Here was a prostitute who in fact profited from dejection. Dattatreya found the lesson he learned from her to be of great value, and thus the prostitute, too, became one of his twenty-four teachers.

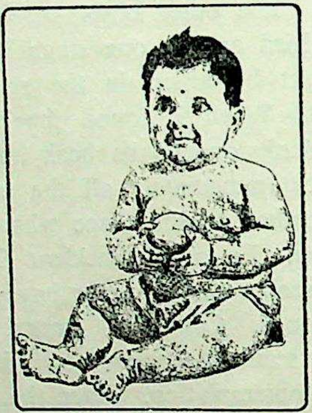
Shun Wordly Goods—Like the Kuru Bird

What should be the attitude of a devoted soul to worldly possessions? How much worldly goods may he have? These questions were answered for Dattatreya by the Kuru bird. A piece of meat which a Kuru Bird was carrying in its beak set dozens of birds after it. The other birds were fast closing in on the Kuru Bird and at one stage it appeared that the latter might be killed in the scramble for the piece of meat. When it found the odds against it the Kuru suddenly opened its beak and dropped the piece of meat. Immediately all the other birds left it alone and rushed to the place where the piece of meat had fallen. From this incident Dattatreya concluded that a seeker should never have any collection of worldly goods. Collection turned one uneasy, fearful and persecuted, leaving one with hardly any time for quiet contemplation. Even the most ordinary gifts of Nature like soothing sleep would be denied to an individual. In his case, life's fitful fever would continue unabated, and the only rest such a person might have would be in the grave.

Be Satisfied with What You Get—Like the Child

Collection or no collection, bodily needs are to be met by all, even by a seeker. Take the case of hunger for instance. From a sinner to a saint all need food. The difference, however, is in the approach and attitude of the latter. To except whatever food he gets when he feels hungry is all that should concern a Seeker. He should not bother about food at other times. Questions like 'Where will I find my next meal?' or 'Who will give me food tomorrow?' should never worry a Seeker. Dattatreya learned this lesson from a child. The child keeps playing merrily.

When it feels hungry, it cries and gets fed. Again it starts playing; in its own way, it is too busy to worry about the next meal. Here was an example worth emulating. To reach God, it is said, one has

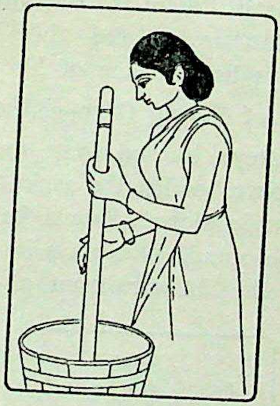


to be child-like. One should start being child-like especially regarding food requirements. How much of peace and serenity would one experience when no time is wasted on worrying? This is indeed a good lesson and for this Dattatreya made the child his teacher.

Be Alone—Like the Maiden's Bangles

After learning to be child-like in respect of food, a spiritual aspirant should also cultivate a number of qualities for steady progress on the Path. One of the qualities is solitude. A Seeker should love to be alone most of the time. Away from the crowd, away from the time. Away from the crowd, away away from the din and bustle of life, unseen and alone in a quiet place— this is the proper setting for one who wishes to unravel the great truths of the universe. Dattatreya learned this lesson in a household scene.

A maiden was busy, one day, with the household chore of separating the husk from the paddy. Her work required her to keep pounding a certain measure of paddy in a huge receptacle, with a heavy pole. She was in the inner room, and some guests were seated in the outer room of the house. Every time she pounded the paddy with the pole, the bangles in her hands caused a certain peculiar sound which naturally revealed to the guests the type of work she was engaged in. The maiden desired to be secretive, even as she wanted to continue with her work without making any sound. Her bangles were creating a problem for her. However gently she pound the paddy, the sound from the bangles was still there. She then had an idea. The bangles caused the sound because there were many of them in each hand, she thought. Perhaps the sound may not be there if she had fewer bangles. She took off one

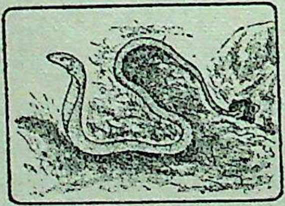


bangle from each hand and resumed her work, but the sound was still present. She then took off another bangle from each hand, and yet another and another. Still the sound was there. At last there was left on each hand just one bangle, and lo! there was no more sound. Peacefully she continued her work.

The conclusion from this was that one should be alone to acquire any peace and progress. There is less distraction and therefore concentration is better. When you are alone with the great Maker, real communion is possible betwen man and God. As a well-known saying has it, "there is no crowd at the gates of Heaven." Dattatreya owed this lesson to the maiden. She thus became one of his teachers.

Own No House of Young Own—Like the Snake

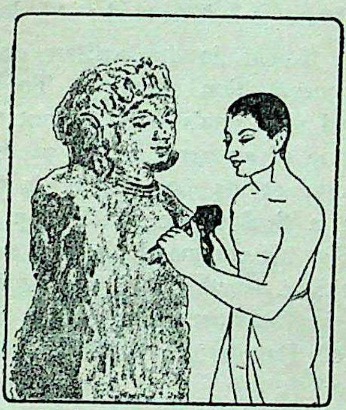
What Dattatreya learned from the maiden was, however, incomplete, in that the aspirant was not told *where* to stay while alone. Should he have a house of his own? Or should he always be on the move? Dattatreya got the answer from a snake. As is



well-known, a snake never prepares a hole for itself to live in. It stays in any hole for a night, and the next day it moves to some other hole. An aspirant too, should follow the example of the snake regarding his stay. Never staying in one place for long, and not having a house of one's own, is necessary to keep one above the perils of attachment to any one place. Dattatreya made the snake one of his teachers for his lesson.

Cultivate the Power of Concentration—Like the Artisan

The lessons noted so far have removed the obstacles in the way of the efficient working of the mind. What now remains is the mind itself. What precisely is meant by concentration of mind, which leads one on to higher realms of spiritual experience? How efficient and absorbed can a mind be which is not distracted? One more incident during his wandering made things clear to Dattatreya.



An artisan was busy with his work of making a bow and arrow. He was so absorbed in his work that he forgot everything else. Presently the army of a King passed by his place of work, but he was thoroughly occupied with his work as before. After a little while one soldier came up to him and asked him whether an army had marched that way just a little earlier. The artisan raised his face, looked straight at the soldier for a few moments as if gathering himself up from his work, and at last replied : "I don't know". Soon he was back at work.

It so happened that the army marched back again the same way in front of his place of work. After some time, the very same soldier once again came to the artisan and asked the same question. Once again the artisan raised his face and after a few moments of silence as before, said : "I don't know".

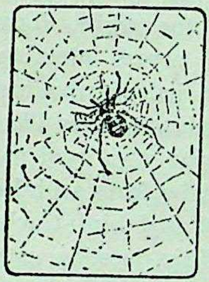
Dattatreya found in the artisan an exemplary instance of concentration of mind. To be so completely identified with one's work as not to be aware of the marching of an army a few paces away—this is concentration at its best. This is the kind of concentration a Seeker should develop. With such concentration at his command, there is nothing which he cannot achieve, whether it is success in this world or salvation in the next. The artisan was included in the list of Dattatreya's teachers because of his lesson.

Do Not Be Over-Ambitious—Like a Spider

How wonderful it is to command a highly developed power of concentration ! Like all valuable posessions it invests one with a sense of power. But this power could be misused, and here precisely is the danger. One could become so ambitious and intoxicated with one's own importance that one may overreach oneself, getting lost in one's grandiose schemes and having no chance of either escape or redemption.

It was while observing a spider that this truth was revealed to Dattatreya.

The spider was busy weaving a wed. In time a large web was ready, and the spider was waiting in the centre for flies to be caught in the web. In the meantime, a hungry crow perched on a nearby bough, and finding nothing else for its food, decided to make the spider its prey. When the crow swooped down the spider could not save itself, being too involved in the vast web. Thus the web which it had prepared for preying upon other insects or flies, itself became its death trap.



Dattatreya saw in this a worthy lesson which should escape the notice of none. Let not a man's ambitions be so far-fetched as to turn him into a prisoner in one's own palace. The power of concentration should be used wisely in order to make one free of bondage : used carelessly it will make one a slave of one's schemes, like the spider in the incident.

Share With Others—Like the Bhringi Bird

So far, from his twentythree teachers, Dattatreya had gathered almost all the qualities needed for an aspirant on the Spiritual Path. To one practising all the twenty-three virtues seen so far, success must come as though by right. But Dattatreya was still not satisfied with what wisdom he had gathered, for, to be complacent was truly against his nature. Here was a born Seeker, trudging the length and breadth of the land, seeing here, noting there and listening everywhere and all the while drawing lesson from situations he came across after carefully analysing them : a great man indeed who had the humility to learn from such lowly creatures like insects, bees and birds. This great man who lived to learn, found now something to benefit by from a bird called the Bhringi. What could the Bhringi bird teach his who already learnt so much ? This question naturally arise. Here precisely is the greatness of Dattatreya who never considered himself too great to learn. Like living, learning too should be a continuous process. If the Bhringi could be availed of for the purpose, he was ready to elevate it also to the status of his teacher.

The Bhringi would catch a worm and carry it to its nest. Then it would place the worm down in the nest and produce from its beak some musical sounds for the benefit of the former. The worm would feel very pleased by the musical sound made by the Bhringi. This would continue for a while and the worm would then crawl out of the nest, and the Bhringi would fly out in search of some other worm. The only concern of this bird was to provide the poor worms with some happiness through listening to its musical notes. Dattatreya saw here an example worthy of emulation. Whatever wisdom one has gathered, one should be freely shared with others, spreading in one's own humble way a little cheer, and a little sunshine. It becomes a teacher even to go out of his way and spread his message of harmony and happiness. The Bhringi was thus made a teacher in Dattatreya's list which now had twentyfour of them in all.

When Dattatreya thus completed the explanation of his twentyfour teachers, the King was naturally much impressed with this 12-year old boy who had gathered such great knowledge so early in his life. The King bowed at the feet of young Dattatreya and pleaded to be accepted as his disciple. Here was the first disciple of Dattatreya who had studied so much quite early in his life that he was naturally considered a worthy teacher of mankind—a born teacher, a beacon of light for the rest, groping in the darkness of their ignorance. Dattatreya was great because he was humble enough to learn from everywhere and everything. Considering the fact that he made his teaching so lucid and easy to understand, giving instances known to all, we are inclined to think that Dattatreya was an incarnation, a God in human form, who lived only to make others live as life should be lived.

6th STORY

LORD KRISHNA

HE ENDEARED HIMSELF TO ONE AND ALL BY STEALING — CURDS & HEARTS

The birth of Lord Krishna took place in a prison. Even though born a human being, there was a supernatural glow about his face. The very look of him could make people see God in him. The birth took place at the stroke of midnight. Devaki and Vasudeva, the mother and father of Lord Krishna, became very glad that an incarnation had been bestowed upon them in the form of their son.

Lord Krishna was the eighth child of Devaki and Vasudeva. Their previous seven children had been killed by Kansa, the brother of Devaki. Kansa was very fond of Devaki before her marriage with Vasudeva. But after the marriage an astrologer predicted that the eighth child of Devaki would kill Kansa. Hearing this Kansa became afraid and he decided to Kill Devaki then and there so that the very possibility of bearing children might be wiped out. But his father Ugrasen and his brother-in-law Vasudeva pleaded for her life. They argued that she was innocent and therefore she should not be killed. Vasudeva, however, assured him that he could kill all the children of Devaki as soon as they would be born. Kansa was satisfied with this condition because he thought that he was out of danger if each child could be killed soon after its birth. Nevertheless he put Devaki, Vasudeva and Ugrasen into prison. They had to live there at his mercy.

When the eighth child was about to be born Kansa became so restless that he could not even sleep soundly. The fear haunted him day and night. He did not want to waste even a minute. He was only strong in physique but weak in mind. He became uneasy for days together.

Devaki and Vasudeva were worried because Kansa was sure to swoop down any moment and kill the child. They then heard a voice from without saying: "Do not worry about the child. Take it to the house of Yashoda and Nanda at Gokul and exchange it for their female child. Bring that female child and keep it with you. All will be well". They were agreeably surprised to hear this instruction.

Soon Devaki and Vasudeva wrapped the child in a piece of cloth. Vasudeva quietly took it out of the prison when the guards were fast asleep and came over to cross the river Jamuna. The river was fully flooded, and it was pitch dark. Still he could easily cross the river as the water parted in the middle and made a path for him. When he came to the house of Nanda and Yashoda, he found every one there fast asleep. He quietly placed child Krishna inside the house and came out with the female child of Yashoda and Nanda.

As he was returning he found the water of the river Jamuna still rising. But again the water gave him way and Vasudeva could easily cross the river and reach the prison where Devaki had been waiting for him. Next morning, Kansa rushed to the prison and saw the new-born baby. He immediately seized it and was about to dash it to the ground. Devaki started crying; she pleaded that the child was only a girl and therefore could do him no harm. "Please spare its life" she begged of her brother. But Kansa was not moved by her tears. He said that an enemy was an enemy no matter of what sex. So saying he lifted the child to dash it to the ground, when the baby girl broke loose from his grip and soared in the air thundering: "You are a sinner, O, Kansa! You will never be saved in your life. The child that is going to kill you is already born." So saying the baby girl vanished from his sight.

This incident was a great eye-opener for Kansa. That a tiny baby could free itself from his grip and soar in the air uttering a warning like a grown-up person was something which his pride could not tolerate. He knew by his past experience in killing children that a human child did not even try to put up a fight when being killed; it died just crying a little. It had not taken Kansa anything more than a few moments to squeeze out life from a child; he had just to dash it to the ground and within moments it would be all over. But this tiny female child seemed quite unlike the previous ones. And to cap it all, it had issued a warning even as it refused to be killed at his hands. If Devaki's eighth child had already taken birth, and he had not yet been able to trace its whereabouts, could it be that the sands of time were running out for him? The fear which he always used to experience whenever he thought of sister Devaki's children, now became boundless. It was a shivering and shuddering Kansa who ran back to the safety of his palace on hearing the child's warning. To those of his retinue it appeared as if the King was running for his life.

Kansa knew that like all mortals he to would die one day. His fear was because of the prophesy that he would be killed in the prime of his life by Devaki's eighth child. It was this kind of unnatural death which he feared. For one like Kansa to whom it was given to enjoy life to the full as a King alone could, heady with his own importance, intoxicated with power which his position permitted him, the prospect of being murdered in cold blood could certainly be disquietening. Yet that was the prophesy which precisely was the cause of the King's great fear.

Once within the palace, Kansa lost no time in planning and plotting. His first concern was to find the eighth child of Devaki. Towards this end he despatched couriers to all the corners of his kingdom. In due course news about a wonderful child at Yashoda's place reached the King's ears, and piecing together all the information, he could come to the correct conclusion that *this* should be the eighth child.

His next concern was to kill the child, just as he had done seven times in the past. He could not do it now personally as the Child Krishna was at Yashoda's place in Gokul which was not a part of his Kingdom, Mathura. Gokul on the other side of Jamuna was independent of Mathura though for all practical purposes the people of the two kingdoms mingled freely. This was no great problem, for as the King of Mathura, Kansa could have easily contrived to get the child within his kingdom. But after his latest experience with the female child, he hesitated to undertake the task himself. For all he knew, this child, too, might escape and he would appear a laughing stock before his people. He, therefore, decided to entrust the job to someone else who could accept faliure—which God forbid—if it became necessary.

At this time, as if a God-sent succour, Kansa secured the services of a witch named Pootana. She convinced the King of her special ability for such tasks. She demonstrated how she could transform herself into any desirable shape and pass off for any being but a witch. When Kansa saw that the witch Pootana could be transformed into a comely maid, he needed no further persuation to entrust the task to her.

Kansa briefed her thoroughly on her treacherous assignment. She was to go about her task in a stealthy manner so as to arouse no suspicion. Either by dress or by looks she was not to appear like a killer, and above all she was to accomplish the task without using a knife or a chopper.

The evil genius that she was, Pootana set about her task with a thoroughness of a professional. She transformed herself into a milk-maid—Gopi—and strayed into Yashoda's place. She congratulated Yashoda on her having become the proud mother of Child Krishna. She then pretended to be possessing a heart which overflowed with love for little children. Soon she took in her arms the tiny Child Krishna, and after fondling it for some moments, settled down to breast-feed the baby. All this appeared so natural that even mother Yashoda suspected no foul play. Only Pootana, in the guise of the milkmaid, knew what lay behind her gesture to feed the baby: she had applied deadly poison on her breasts and the child which suckled was sure to die of it.

If King Kansa, Pootana and Child Krishna were the only characters in the real life drama that was taking place at Yashoda's place, there would not have been even a ghost of a chance for the suckling child to survive. But there was another character, too, without which no drama could be complete. It is an invisible character whose existance could never be doubted. Generally, people call it Divine, for good reasons too, as many a time this fourth element upsets the apple-cart of the other characters and brushes aside all their well-laid plans. Perhaps because of this, it is often said that the ways of the Divine are inscrutable and strange. Sometimes with the backing of the mighty force of the Divine, even an ant could beat hollow a giant: a phenomenon which the logic of normal events would never accept, but which nevertheless can be possible.

It was given to Pootana to understand this truth first. In the beginning she began feeling pleased with herself as the baby began suckling. She should have congratulated herself on her skill in having carried out Kansa's instructions to perfection. But soon some strange fears crossed her mind when she found the Child Krishna still vigorously suckling though by now the poison should have spread all over his little body. Was the poison not deadly enough for the child, Pootana wondered. She began having a vague feeling that something had gone wrong with her; the feeling became certain when she tried and failed to stop the Baby from suckling further. Presently she began feeling giddy with the Child still at her breast, and shortly she fell down with a heavy thud, the Baby still clinging to her breast. The milk-maid of a few moments before, now lay there as the witch Pootana, a huge mass of ugly flesh, writhing in pain, as if Child Krishna had suckled out blood from her body. Soon she was dead.

When this news reached Kansa, he could hardly believe his ears. Failing to find any explanation for Pootana's failure, he became speech-less and spell-bound.

The Divine which had spared Child Krishna from the poisoned feed of Pootana, had its own special reason for doing so. It was manifesting itself through this Child. Here was a people terrorised by a tyrant whose atrocities knew no bounds. Ever since he had heard the Prophesy about his death at the hands of a Child, he made children the special target of his cruelty. Innumerable were the instances when the King got displeased at the sight of a child and passed orders that it be killed. Parents dared not appear in public place with their young ones for fear of inviting on themselves the royal wrath. The very atmosphere was surcharged with fear—the fear that under Kansa's rule no child could breathe freely.

It was amidst such people that Child Krishna was born to fulfil the great purpose of the Divine that a Child alone could allay the fears of the people terrorised by a child-fearing Kansa. Only a lovable little child like Krishna could ease the mind of the people saddened with horror-tales of Kansa's attitude to children. Here was a little Child, now barely three years old, freely pulling itself in and out of many a house in Gokul, a sweet smile always on its face, oozing sunshine and happiness all around. No doubt the people took Child Krishna to their heart. Soon it came to pass that the people would feel sore if the Child did not stray into their houses at least once in a day. At its playful pranks they relaxed and laughed. "Here, indeed, is an *Avatar!*" they exclaimed.

Child Krishna was very mischievous and he always wanted to eat away curds and sweets from many a house. One day as he was stealthily eating curds, the housemaid caught him and questioned him about the theft. Child Krishna replied that he was not eating the curds, but that he was only removing the ants which had fallen in the curds. Hearing this clever answer the maid forgot her anger and instead kissed the Child. The next day, Child Krishna was caught by the same maid while again eating curds. This time she took him to Yashoda with her complaints. When his mother asked him why he was doing such a thing, Child Krishna clenched his hands behind him replying that he had not stolen curds, but that others had poured some into his mouth just to show him up as the culprit. At this humorous reply, the maid started laughing together with Yashoda and other women gathered at the place.

On another day, Child Krishna went into a neighbourhood house to steal curds. Seeing that the pot of curds was kept hanging from a high place he called a few of his friends and made them kneel one above the other. When he thought that the elevation thus achieved was adequate, he climbed up and stood on top of all of them and raised his hands to empty the pot of curds. All this caused some noise, which brought to the place a few ladies, among them the lady of the house. At this, all the boys took to their heels,—all except Child Krishna. The woman of the house caught hold of Child Krishna and took him to mother Yashoda. Even as she was busy complaining, Child Krishna cleverly extricated himself from her hold and replaced her own son instead without her knowledge. Noticing what had happened Yashoda and the other ladies could not help laughing and soon the one who had rushed thither with the complaint only a little while ago, also broke into laughter, as she discovered that the child she was holding was her own. Such were the childhood pranks of Child Krishna who endeared himself to one and all by stealing curds and hearts.

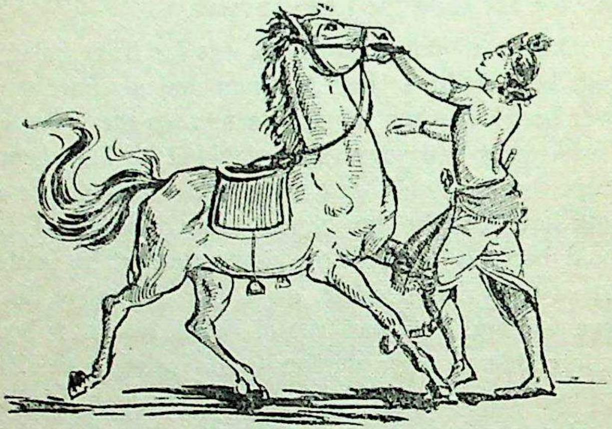
When Lord Krishna was three years old, he would often eat mud. One day Mother Yashoda noticed this, and she immediately came forward to take away the mud from the child's mouth. She asked Child Krishna to open his mouth and spit out the mud. The Child did no such thing; he kept his mouth tightly closed. Yashoda became angry at this and she slapped the Child on the cheek. Child Krishna now opened his mouth and lo! there Yashoda saw not the mud, but the whole of the universe: the earth, the sky, the sun, the moon, the cities, the forests, men, animals, saints and so on—indeed the entire creation. Krishna had opened before Mother Yashoda a spectacle for the glimpse of which sages do penance for long years. What she beheld within the mouth of her Child was indescribable; it made her the happy recipient of Joy Supreme. Yashoda realised how she was indeed a blessed Soul to have for her child the Lord Himself.

During all this time Kansa was far from quiet; indeed, how could he be? A tyrant and a sinner would never be silent when they begin to reap the whirl-wind of what they had sown. Nor would it be like them to accept the inevitable, and mend their ways at the eleventh hour. As the day of reckoning approached, they would become all the more desperate and be in dead earnest to win if possible, or in the alternative, to go down fighting. This was true of Kansa who now began sending demon after demon to do away with Child Krishna. He hoped that at least one of the demons would return with success, and not go the way of the witch Pootana. In this at least, Kansa believed in the saying: "Try, Try and Try Again!"

The demon now chosen for the purpose was Bakasura. He set about the task disguising himself as a ferocious bird called Bakula. When Child Krishna was out in a field with his playmates, Bakula swooped down on them at great speed and tried to snatch away the three-year old enemy of Kansa. All the playmates were greatly frightened at this, they ran away for safety in all haste. Child Krishna was the only one who did not move from the place; he caught hold of Bakula's Beak and tore it into two pieces. The giant Bakula flew no more: it lay dead in the field.

The death of Bakasura made Kansa all the more disturbed. He now sent another giant called Aghasura.

Taking the form of a ferocious horse, Aghasura charged at Child Krishna. As the horse opened its mouth as if to gobble up the Child, Krishna thrust his hand deep into its throat till it fell dead.



Krishna thrusts his hand into the horse's mouth

Once more did Kansa find himself upset; he was gradually getting desperate beyond words. He now chose one of the strongest giants called Narakasura. Appearing in the form of a donkey, Narakasura tried to kick down Child Krishna. Even before it could deliver its first kick, Child Krishna caught hold of one its legs and dashed the beast against the ground. Braying madly with pain, the donkey dragged on its life for a few more moments before death silenced it once and for all.

Child Krishna was now nine years old. He was one day playing with a ball in the company of his playmates. All of a sudden the ball happened to fall into a nearby river. No one was prepared to jump into the water and get the ball because of a ferocious cobra called Kaleeya which had made that part of the river its abode. The very mention of the name of the deadly serpent made people quiver with fear. But as he knew no fear, Child Krishna jumped into the river and began searching for the ball. His playmates on the bank of the river became very panicky and they raised such a hue and cry that within moments almost the whole of Gokul gathered at the place. Mother Yashoda and Father Nanda were also in the gathering. Everyone looked anxiously into the dark waters of the river for a sign of Krishna,—dark because of the poison constantly emitted by Kaleeya.

Child Krishna who went down into the water, found the ball adorning the hood of the deadly Kaleeya. At once he jumped on to the hood of the Cobra and began giving it such a pounding with his legs that Kaleeya started vomiting blood instead of poison. But unlike the giants we have seen so far, Kaleeya had the good sense to plead for mercy from Lord Krishna; it promised to stop its evil ways and be no longer a terror to the locality. Lord Krishna was, indeed, glad to spare its life. When those assembled at the river bank witnessed the spectacle of Kaleeya rising up from within the water, proudly carrying a smiling young Krishna on its hood, as if to assure them that it should not be feared any more, they could find no words to express what they saw. "This is a miracle!" they all shouted. "Blessed is Mother Yashoda!" But the great Mother Yashoda who by now knew the real nature of her son, calmly stood there, her eyes filled with tears—tears of joy that her little Son was safe.

At this time, Lord Indra was being popularly worshipped by the people of Gokul. Lord Krishna exhorted his people to worship the cows of Gowardhana and not Lord Indra. When this reached the ears of Lord Indra, he became very angry and decided to teach to the people of Gokul a lesson of their life. He lashed at Gokul with rain and thunder till the place was threatened to be submerged in a deluge. All the people of Gokul approached Lord Krishna for a way out of the calamity. Krishna bade them to be calm. He soon raised the Mountain Gowardhan and kept it over Gokul as a protection from the downpour. Seeing the miracle of a mountain being raised and held over a vast place like a protective umbrella, Lord Indra calmed down and halted the downpour.

Kansa was still busy planning to kill Child Krishna. One day he announced that a wrestling contest would be held in his kingdom. All those who could fight with his men, of whom the wrestler Chanoor was the mightiest, were invited to take part. Kansa secretly arranged with his men that when Krishna would enter the arena, he should be crushed by a mad elephant called Kuvalyapeeda. Lord Krishna wanted to challenge Chanoor for a wrestling bout. As he entered the arena, the mahut let the elephant Kuvalyapeeda on him. Seeing the elephant rushing towards him, Lord Krishna at once jumped on to its head and began hitting it with both his hands. The elephant died almost immediately and the mahut was nowhere to be seen.

Lord Krishna turned his attention now to Chanoor, the renowned wrestler of the time. When Krishna challenged Chanoor to come down to the arena and take part in a bout of wrestling, the latter declared that he never set foot in the arena without proper ceremony and music. Lord Krishna wondered why there should be any ceremony and music when Chanoor was sure to lose his life in the bout. So saying he pulled down Chanoor from his seat and threw him to the ground. Chanoor, the great wrestler on whom Kansa had pinned his high hopes in the present contest, could not even get up from the ground. Such was the effect of the knock out he received at the hands of Lord Krishna.

Seeing Chanoor writhing in pain, Kansa became tongue-tied with shock. He knew from his innermost depths that nothing could now save him. If this little Child, not more than ten years old, could put to death such demons as Bakasura or Narakasura, and if he could vanquish such renowned wrestlers like Chanoor, what chance of victory did he himself have? For he was neither a demon nor a wrestler. It had appeared quite an easy thing to dash to the ground and kill Devaki's previous seven children. He could not repeat the same act with this eighth Child.

How he wished that some one from the vast gathering assembled round the arena would come forth to help him! What a pity that not even one soul stood up in support of the King of Mathura! On the other hand, there was an expectant mood in the gathering. Perhaps they were looking forward to the greatest drama of their life-time—the end of cruel Kansa. Their hopes were not belied, for in no time Kansa was seen being dragged and rolled to the ground so suddenly that he did not even have enough time to pull out his sword from its sheath. Lord Krishna was now sitting on the broad chest of the tyrant Kansa, delivering such heavy blows on the latter's face and chest as to make red, hot blood spurt forth with each blow. Soon Kansa was dead.

The people of Gokul became jubilant because the tyrant was killed. They asked Lord Krishna to be their King. But Lord Krishna suggested that Ugrasen, the father of Kansa, be made the King of Mathura. After crowning Ugrasen as the King of Mathura, Lord Krishna with his brother Balaram studied Vedas and Shastras at the feet of Sage Sandeepany. He grew to ripe old age. In his later life, Lord Krishna authored the epic work of wisdom—the Sacred Geeta.

Thus ends the story of Krishna's childhood. What lessons could we draw from this? Could we just repeat the widely-held belief that Krishna was an incarnation and hence he deserved our veneration? Let us also not forget that this belief has the sanction of time behind it. On the other hand, what do we see when Krishna is viewed as just a human being? The answer to this is more valuable for a proper study of Krishna. Strip a divine being of his divinity and scrutinise what remains. If the scrutiny yields some shades of greatness in the character, we should then ungrudgingly grant him his claim to divinity. For none could be divine, who could not be a great human being.

Viewed in this light, Krishna deserves to be considered great for two reasons. One, he did nothing for himself and everything for others. He had no scores to settle with any of the demons that came to kill him. Nor did he consider himself an enemy of any of them. He had to do away with them for the sake of peace and security of his people. This was equally true of his killing the tyrant Kansa.

The second reason is that Krishna was a willing instrument in the hands of the Divine which manifested itself through him. He had no part to play other than what the Divine wanted him to. Later on in his life, as he exhorted Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, every action was performed by the Divine and one did nothing by oneself. The truth of this saying is borne out by the incidents that took place in Krishna's childhood. The Divine plan to end the tyranny of Kansa was worked out through Lord Krishna. He lived and worked only so long as he was useful to the Divine and when the time came for Him to die, this great man gladly accepted an end in which he was shot down by a hunter—again as the Divine had designed it. He never bargained for any "beter treatment" in the last scene of His life.

These two reasons are, indeed, sufficient for us to confer upon Krishna the halo of divinity. Perhaps it is guided by this consideration that people believe that they receive divine blessings, when doing the Japa:

"HARE KRISHNA, HARE KRISHNA,
KRISHNA KRISHNA, HARE HARE."

7th STORY

SAVITRI

AT WHOSE HANDS DEATH GOT A BEATING OF ITS LIFETIME

FOOD removes hunger, water removes thirst, sun removes darkness, compassion removes anger and love removes hatred. But devotional worship of God steers one clear of all calamities. Because of this, we find that human beings have been offering ardent prayers to the Almighty ever since creation. No prayer to God goes waste as all seekers know and there is no man who has not had at least some of his prayers answered. The story of Savitri is a classic example of the wonderful power of prayer.

Ashwapati was the noble, generous and virtuous king of Madradesh (which was a popular place in Punjab). The people of Madradesh were very pleased with their king. One thing, however, made Ashwapati dissatisfied and sad. He had no issue by his wife. At last he decided that only gods could fulfil his desire. Therefore the king decided to go into a deep forest and worship God. King Ashwapati gave up the luxurious life of the palace and began meditating without having even food and water. At the time of meditation, he used to forget himself completely and be totally absorbed in his deeper self. Thus he meditated for years.

The heavenly gods and goddesses became pleased by Ashawapati's continued meditation and decided to grant him a boon. According to the boon the king was to become the father of a baby-girl. After a few days, while the king was deeply engrossed in meditation one morning, Goddess Saraswati appeared in his consciousness and said: "O King Ashawapati! By your deep meditation the gods and goddesses are pleased, and on their request I am to take birth as your daughter by your wife. You are blessed that the gods have favoured you." Saying these words Goddess Saraswati disappeared. As his wish was to be fulfilled the king became very happy and returned to his kingdom.

After some time Queen Malati gave birth to a female child. King Ashwapati became very happy and he sent for the astrologer in order to know about the child's future. Examining the palm of the little child, the astrologer became wonder-struck regarding her future. It was evident that her palm foretold that she was the symbol of the Goddess of Wealth — Laxmi, Goddess of Knowledge — Saraswati and Goddess of Character — Parvati. The baby was sure to bring luck to her parents, brothers, father-in-law, husband and sons. There was, however, one mysterious mark in her palm. And it showed that she would be facing some great tragedy in her life — the like of which no woman had ever faced — but ultimately she would emerge the grand winner and that she would be worshipped by all women from generation to generation. The astrologer in the end suggested that her name should be Savitri.

Slowly Savitri began attracting the attention of the people even as a child. It was absolutely impossible to believe that a girl of hardly a few years could show great devotion to God or be deeply interested in prayers. She would often forget herself while deep in meditation in which she spent hours and hours. This happened very often, and even when mother Malati threw hot or cold water on her face, it was with great difficulty that Savitri could come to her normal consciousness. Her way of talking and asking the questions was highly philosophical. Without any study she knew all branches of knowledge and she was able to express and explain the deep layers of thought. Now she was known not only as Ashwapati's daughter, but people also started saying that Savitri was a goddess in the form of a girl. From morning till evening people from various places started coming to the King's palace to see Savitri and seek her advice to solve their difficulties. The palace of King Ashwapati now became a temple and Savitri was the idol. The people used to say that King Ashwapati and Queen Malati were indeed fortunate to have such a goddess as their daughter. Now Ashwapati and Malati realised the veracity of the words of the astrologer. Savitri was really a goddess of knowledge, wealth and character.

In due course Savitri grew into a lovely maiden. The King and the Queen decided that they should find a suitable match for their daughter. They called their ministers and instructed them to look for a noble and virtuous youth who could be a life-partner to Savitri. The ministers went out in search of a suitable match from one kingdom to another. Ultimately they came back without finding any. They could not find any person whom they could even vaguely suggest as a possible match for Savitri. The ministers further suggested to the King: "Sire! In our search we could not find anyone suitable enough to be considered by you in connection with Savitri's marriage. We have come to the conclusion that we should leave it to Savitri herself to choose her future husband. She is quite capable of deciding for herself." The King and the Queen accepted this suggestion.

One day Ashwapati and Malati explained to Savitri that according to the Law of Nature each and every female should have her mate, as life would be incomplete otherwise. "We are worried about yourself these days," the King said, "and it is our great desire that you should yourself find out a suitable young man whom you might like to marry." Savitri assured her father that she would obey his orders and act accordingly.

Savitri set out in search of a life-partner. But instead of going about her business in the royal houses of the kingdom far and near, she turned to the forests, and visited many Ashramas on the way, receiving the blessings of a good number of saints and sages. Many days had passed since she began her search, but she was still after more and more Ashramas situated in the thick of jungles, and which were presided over by saintly souls. This was the cause for much worry and embarrassment to the ministers escorting her, and one of them even went to the extent of reminding her of the real purpose of the task for which King Ashwapati had sent her out.

Hearing the words of the minister, Savitri smiled and said : "O Minister, the path of sages is indeed worthwhile and noble. But I do not want to adopt that way of life at present because I would like to fulfil my parents' desire. But of one thing I am sure. The blessings of sages and saints will help me find my life-partner, and therefore I am visiting more and more Ashramas."

Savitri proceeded further in yet another direction in the forest. There her eye fell on a handsome young man, who was carrying a bundle of faggots on his head. He looked indeed very attractive, his face shone brightly, his chest was broad with his hands almost touching his knees. He was poorly attired, which showed that he hailed from a family of meagre means. Such, however, was his bearing that Savitri was greatly attracted to him. She soon realised that her search for a life-mate had come to an end on a happy note. She informed the ministers that she had found her life-partner and that she did not want to proceed any further. The ministers began gathering some information about the handsome young man who was known by the name of Satyawan, and whose father's name was Dyumatsen. Both father and son lived the life of sages in the forest. Dyumatsen was blind and son Satyawan was very much devoted to his father. Formerly Dyumatsen was a king but he had been defeated by his enemies and exiled from his kingdom. After getting this information the party returned to the palace.

Savitri came back in a happy mood. She wanted to bow at the feet of her father Ashwapati, before breaking the good news to him. But she saw there the heavenly sage, Narada, conversing with her parents, and she touched the feet of Narada — as was the custom of the day. Narada blessed her saying that she would be the mother of many children. He then made inquiries with King Ashwapati regarding her marriage. Ashwapati told him that Savitri had been out in search of her life-partner and that she had just then returned, perhaps after succeeding in her mission. As soon as Narada heard this, he was eager to know who the lucky soul was, whom Savitri had chosen for her life-partner. At this Savitri naturally felt shy, but the ministers who had escorted her told all about Satyawan and Dyumatsen. When he heard the name of Satyawan, Narada became very pleased and said: "Well done, Savitri, well done! Really you have found a capable person for your life-partner. To the best of my knowledge I have not come across any youth like Satyawan. He is the paragon of virtue, might and strength. He is wise and generous. You have made an excellent selection, Savitri. But in spite of all his charms and abilities there is one great hitch in the matter. I can't blame you for not knowing it. Perhaps you might change your decision if you knew what I am in a position to tell you about his future. The sad thing is that Satyawan is destined to die exactly a year hence. But for this he would be a very ideal husband for you. Still if you insist on marrying him, nobody can stop you."

On hearing the words of Narada, King Ashwapati and Queen Malati, as also the ministers felt shocked. Savitri, however, became furious. Her parents could not think of giving her in marriage to Satyawan. On the one hand Narada had praised the virtues of Satyawan while on the other he had no clear-cut objections to her marriage with him. The King became surprised at this difficult position which appeared almost like a riddle.

In response to the King's queries, Sage Narada said : "O my dear King ! I have been waiting for this situation ever since Savitri started on her search for her life-mate. There was, of course, nothing I could do before she had made her choice in the forest. It was then that I foresaw the brief length of Satyawan's lifespan, and so I have come here to forewarn you. Life and death are but natural for mortals; no one can survive for ever. But some things happen at the proper time, some things do not. Death at the prime of life can never be a proper thing. To die within one year of marriage is anything but a happy event. I would, therefore, like to inform you all that Satyawan is destined to breathe his last a year hence. And now it is up to you all to help Savitri decide properly."

King Ashwapati now turned to Savitri : "My darling daughter, you have heard the Sage. We all feel that in the circumstances, it will not be wise for you to marry Satyawan. Go again and find someone else for your life-mate. It was a great act of kindness on the part of Narada to have come here and thus forewarned us; otherwise we were sure to give our consent to your marriage with Satyawan." Mother Malati could not contain herself. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she said : "Nothing has gone wrong yet, Savitri. Go and select someone else who will have a long life in addition to other virtues. We do not want to play with your life. As you know a life-mate is not a day's toy. You just can't play with it one day, only to break it off the next day."

Persuasion of her father and mother had little effect on Savitri. Without feeling any grief, she thanked the divine Sage Narada and spoke thus to her parents : "Dear Father, Dear Mother, I accepted your suggestion to choose a life-mate. Whatever I have selected with all my heart, good or bad, long life or short life, painful or pleasant, it is my sacred duty to accept him as a Gift of Gods. It cannot be changed. With my limited experience of life, it seems to me that choosing a life-partner is not just a physical and this-worldly affair. I think it is all connected with one's previous birth as also life hereafter. It is not in my stars that I should change my mind now and choose another being as my life-partner. Should I change my mind now, I feel married womanhood might challenge destiny that a soul once given to anyone could not be gifted away to someone else under any circumstances. Even if I am not going to see the face of Satyawan again in my life, his soul and mine have become one and they cannot be separated. Every pore of my being is full of Satyawan; wherever I turn my face, I see Satyawan. There is nothing now that could induce me to change my mind". These words came out so firmly that even Narada was unable to say anything. Narada then persuaded King Ashwapati: "O King think no more. Arrange her marriage with Satyawan.

May you live long to see your daughter becoming the mother of many children, all of them healthy, mighty and virtuous." With these words Narada picked up his Veena, and with 'Narayan, Narayan' on his lips disappeared from the scene.

King Ashwapati summoned all his courage and arranged Savitri's marriage with Satyawan. The King was keen on having a royal atmosphere for the marriage ceremony even if it was to be celebrated in the forest. But Savitri did not relish the idea. She was very happy with the life Satyawan and his father led. The forest with its scenic beauty and rustic charms was very much to her liking and Satyawan's love made it a paradise.

At her Father-in-law's home Savitri worshipped both her husband and Dyumatsen. She was very much occupied in their service which to her was as good as divine worship. She spared herself the least when it came to attending to the needs of the aged and blind Dyumatsen. The latter would often rebuke her for wearing herself out, but Savitri would not listen. On the other hand she argued : "Please do not worry about anything. Nobody feels tired in the service of the Lord. Allow me to do my duty as long there is breath in my body. Who knows what will happen after death? But my good Karma will at least lead me on to a good life."

At night, after Satyawan and Dyumatsen had retired to bed, Savitri would sit down for her meditation. Sometimes she was still seen in meditation when Satyawan woke up in the morning. She constantly remembered the time-limit foretold by Narada regarding Satyawan's life-span. Hence her ardent prayers to seek a way out where all doors of redress seemed closed to her. She was bracing herself to face the inevitable. Perhaps from somewhere within her own deeper Self, she got the soothing assurance that nothing was impossible for a true and devoted soul, and that even the inevitable could be challenged.

One day when Satyawan was preparing to go out to collect some roots and fruits from the forest, Savitri requested that she be permitted to accompany him. Her request was a surprise to Satyawan because she had not touched any food the previous night. Little did Satyawan know that Savitri had been too pre-occupied throughout the night with her prayers and meditation to sleep, for she knew what was to befall him on the morrow. Satyawan naturally did not want her to accompany him to the forest, for the path was rough and moreover there were wild beasts prowling about. At last he said : "If you insist on accompanying me, let it be so. But you should go and get the permission of my father. If he allows, I shall be pleased to take you along to the forest."

Savitri went to Dyumatsen and in a humble voice requested him for permission to accompany Satyawan. It was indeed a surprising request, even though Dyumatsen agreed after some initial hesitation, saying : "O my daughter, if you feel alert and energetic I do not mind your accompanying Satyawan. But you were on fast yesterday." To this Savitri replied : "I feel quite well and fresh to accompany Satyawan," and touching the feet of Dyumatsen she took her leave of him. Dyumatsen blessed her and asked her to be back before sunset.

It was for the first time that Savitri and Satyawan were going out into the forest together, and Satyawan was greatly pleased with the opportunity. He was full of enthusiasm and joy, and as they slowly wound their way amidst the thick growth, he would pick up beautiful flowers that lay scattered all over the path to give them to his beloved, or draw her attention to some scenic highlights, or some rare variety of birds that one came across only in the jungles.

Presently they came to a tree laden with ripe fruit. Satyawan now lost no time in climbing up and picking some ripe ones; he threw these down to Savitri who was eagerly watching his movements. She knew that the fatal hour was approaching as moments slipped by. For Satyawan, however, she appeared to be eagerly waiting for the fruit he was throwing down to her. Indeed she wanted to pick up more fruit and as he tried to reach out for more hanging from some far off branch, he lost his balance and was about to fall down. Somehow he precariously clung to the tree and made haste to reach the ground; his breathing was hard and his vision fast getting blurred. He could hardly stand, but Savitri who knew what was going to come was now all alertness and attention. She placed his head on her lap and let his limbs rest on the ground. With the loose end of her sari, she wiped out the beads of perspiration from Satyawan's brow.

Savitri did *not* shed tears. At this fateful hour, the great power within, which she had been invoking ever since Sage Narada's prediction, took possession of her. She was no longer the tender teenaged girl; she was the embodiment of that Super Power which asserts itself at all critical moments in life. Savitri had become a super woman who could challenge both man and God.

The modern concept of Justice as a blind goddess holding the scales even applies to Duty. One who is duty-bound must be least concerned about the consequences of his actions. He must needs have a detached attitude. This should have been the position of Yama, the God of Death, who now made his appearance on the Scene astride his buffalo, a well-built figure by any standards, resplendent with a glow all his own. True, he was the God of Death, but there was nothing dark or deathly about him. Rather Savitri found him radiant with wisdom, his face calm and composed like one who knew the real nature of things. He even appeared kindly and benevolent, and perhaps left to himself, he would have been the last to cut short Savitri's happiness. Who in this world has the heart to turn a teenaged girl like Savitri into a widow? Yama was not wanting in Mercy and Generosity; perhaps to be cruel is almost foreign to his being. As it was his duty to take over when life ceased to be, he had come to the place with the usual equipment. Seeing Satyawan's head resting on Savitri's lap, Yama hesitated a little, for he wanted to be extremely polite and courteous; he wanted to take away Satyawan's life with as little of displeasure to Savitri as possible. It was indeed a difficult task but the God of Death was quite up to it. Calling into play all the tact he was capable of, Yama bowed before young Savitri: "O righteous woman, I salute you. I am Yama, the Lord of Death. It is my unpleasant duty to take away Satyawan's life."

Savitri stood up placing Satyawan's head on the ground and bowed at the feet of the great Yama saying : "O great God of Death, accept my humble salutations. I am blessed that the Almighty has provided me with an opportunity to be in your presence while I am still in my mortal frame. It is not given to many to have this honour, My Lord."

"Well said, Savitri, well said," said Yama. "Perhaps you may not know that you have earned this opportunity through your spiritual *Sadhana*. No gift is ever granted for nothing in this universe. A reward is won only when you work for it."

"Thanks, Lord Yama, for your compliments. I almost feel as if I am in the presence of a kindly father. Let me again salute you, O great Lord," Savitri replied, and bowed to Yama a second time.

Even as these words were being uttered, Savitri was fully aware of the purpose of Yama's visit. It was as though a part of her was a keen watch over Satyawan's body from which the Soul was yet to be extricated, while the other was engaged in conversing with the God of Death. At the same time, Yama too was acutely conscious of his duty which required him to extricate Satyawan's soul from his body. Not wishing to delay matters, Yama spoke thus to Savitri : "Satyawan was a virtuous man, noble and pure. He was indeed an ideal husband for you. It is so unfortunate that his life span has ended shortly. May be, in some future life, you both could be united as man and wife, living a life-span of a thousand years. Now let me take away his soul as my Duty demands." So saying the God of Death threw a silken chord over Satyawan's body, and pulled out from it his soul. This done Yama mounted his buffalo, took his leave of Savitri with the words: 'May God bless you, my child,' and turning in the opposite direction rode on, Satyawan's soul secure in his custody.

Hardly had the buffalo moved a little, when Yama found to his surprise that Savitri was following him. This was something unexpected. For Yama was used to performing his duties undisturbed. If he had needed much tact to get hold of Satyawan's soul without offending Savitri, he had greater need for tact now to persuade her to return. "Why are you following me, Savitri?" he questioned. "Go back and perform the last rites of Satyawan."

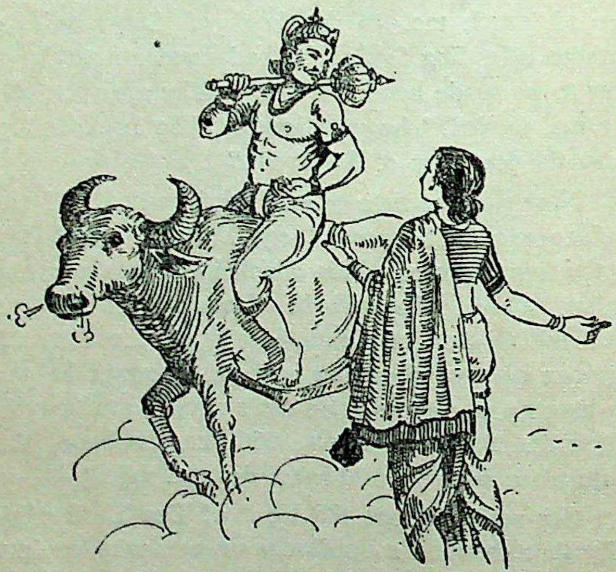
Now was the time when Savitri needed all her wit and courage. She proved equal to the task, thanks to the Super Power within which had taken possession of her. Calmly she replied : "I am only following my husband, O God of Death. Is it not the duty of a virtuous wife to follow her husband wherever he goes? So long as you carry Satyawan's soul, I am bound to follow it. Save with being with her husband, there is no place in this world for a devoted wife."

Her reply pleased the Lord of Death. Realising fully that she was no ordinary woman who could be easily dissuaded from doing what she had chosen to, Yama tried to please her with a boon. "You speak a great truth, my child," said Yama. "I am pleased with you. Ask for a boon but remember you could ask for anything save the soul of Satyawan."

Savitri was touched by Yama's kindness. "It is so kind of you to grant me a boon, my Lord," she said. "May I have the boon that my blind father-in-law may regain his eyesight and also his lost kingdom."

"So be it, my child," Yama said. "Now that I have granted you the boon, let me go, Savitri," So saying he turned the direction and rode ahead.

Imagine his surprise when he found after he had covered a little distance, that Savitri was still following him. The God of Death was now a little perturbed.



Savitri persists in following Yama....

But he knew that the only way out lay in winning over Savitri through more boons, if necessary. Savitri could never be defeated, and Yama was well aware of it.

She could only be won over. "Why are you again following me?" Yama said to her. "Please understand that attachment is the root cause of all the trouble in this world. Humanity suffers because of this attachment. Pain and sorrow cease once we are detached. When you understand this truth, I am sure you will go back and perform the last rites of your late husband."

Savitri's reply was ready almost immediately. "What you say is true, O Lord of Death" she said. "But please explain me. If Lakshmi is always with Narayan, Parvati with Shiva and Saraswati with Brahma, is it not attachment? Then what is wrong with a wife like me trying to be with her husband?"

Yama realised that Savitri was getting the better of him. Instead of his winning over Savitri, it was the other way about. Trying to cut short the argument and be free to move ahead, he said : "Savitri, you are great intellectually, even as you are great in other fields. I am pleased with your replies. Ask for another boon, my child, but ask not for the life of Satyawan."

Yama's kindness overwhelmed the great Savitri. Since not asking for a boon now could be construed as an insult; she spoke : "I can't thank you enough for your second boon, my Lord. Since you have been gracious enough to offer me a second boon, may I wish that my parents who have not been gifted with sons, may bring forth a hundred sons."

"May it be so," Yama replied. He was now in great hurry and he could hardly afford to lose time in carrying on the conversation with her. "Now go back, Savitri, and leave me alone."

The Lord of Death now rode quickly on. He was much worried that so much precious time had been already lost. When, therefore, he soon found that Savitri was still following him, Yama was all confusion. He saw almost no way out of his predicament, with the lovable little woman winning boon after boon from him, and still refusing to leave him alone. Nevertheless he could not get angry with her — who indeed could be? And so he decided to satisfy her with yet another boon.

"Savitri, my child, why are you still following me? Don't bother yourself to answer my question. Ask for yet another boon, my child, and thereafter at least leave me alone. But remember, again, ask not for the life of your husband."

Yama's kindness and offer of a third boon brought out tears of gratitude from Savitri. She made her obeisance at his feet and said : "My Lord, I am yet to meet one kinder than you in my life. Blessed am I that I met you. May your third boon be that my father-in-law be able to see a hundred happy grand-children born to his daughter-in-law."

"So be it, my child, so be it. Now at least leave me alone." Yama was in great hurry and he lashed at his buffalo to make it move faster. He was sure that now at last Savitri was not following him. But when he looked back to be sure, he realised how mistaken he was. For Savitri was still following him. "Savitri," Yama said, a note of dejection now apparent in his voice. "Should you still follow me? Haven't I granted you three boons, my child?"

"This time you yourself are compelling me to follow you, O God of Death," Savitri spoke with supreme assurance. "How could your third boon be realised without your granting me the life of my husband?"

Savitri's words left Yama dumb-founded. Now only did he realise the significance of his last boon. If her father-in-law was to become the grand-father of a hundred happy grand-children born of her, it was obvious that Savitri should be given back Satyawan's life. It was indeed remarkable how without mentioning Satyawan's name in her boon, as indeed God Yama wanted her to, she had made the great Lord of Death yield and grant her the life of Satyawan. The great Yama should have inwardly cursed himself a little for the haste in which he granted the third boon. Indeed his sole objective then had been to dissuade her from following him, and benevolent as he was, he granted her boon after boon, as if to compensate her for the loss of Satyawan. True, he had warned her to ask for anything but the life of Satyawan. But little did he know that the little woman who was following him was so clear in her mind about what she wanted, with not even a touch of haste about her mind, that she could catch him unawares and win from him precisely what he had warned her not to ask. She never gave up, the little Savitri, and she had a plausible explanation, every time she was questioned. She had patience and perseverence, and above all, her great heart was so full of love for one and all, — an all-consuming love which knew no barriers — that the Lord of Death should have found himself off his feet in the sweep of Savitri's love. Here was Love's victory — Love that knew no defeat — and it was a joyous Yama who now gave her husband's soul, saying: "Here, my child, take back Satyawan's life and live with him happily for a thousand years. Go and tell the world that Yama had been defeated — by Love."

Savitri bowed at the feet of the Lord of Death, shedding tears of joy and received Satyawan's soul. As Yama moved ahead after blessing Savitri, he would have felt a little sad that Savitri was no more following him. Such was the power of her love that it made his great heart melt, and the God of Death did look back more than once, eyes full of tears, to see Savitri fast disappearing in the jungle.

Thus we see that Savitri's greatness lay in her love. Add to this her clarity of mind, her wise approach to things and her ready wit, and you have the key to her success. You could never fail in your life if you follow in her footsteps. You and I need not have to wait till we are face to face with death to show our love, patience or perseverence. Indeed Savitri's example is meant for constant application throughout one's life, so that one becomes the happy witness to the phenomenon of surmounting difficulties and achieving greater all-round harmony. Look at it from any angle, Savitri's example is but another way of saying : "To love is to live, to live is to love."

8th STORY

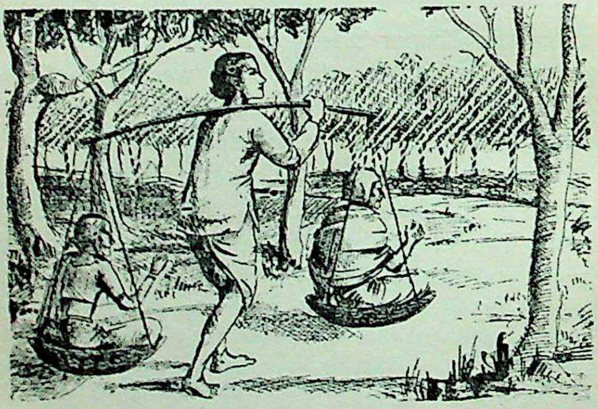
SHRAVAN KUMAR

THE APPLE OF THE EYE TO HIS BLIND PARENTS

Shravan Kumar belonged to the time when King Dashratha ruled Ayodhya. He was born of poor and blind parents, but they had brought him up remarkably well. He was strong healthy and honest, and he had a good character. He bore sincere love and respect for his parents. He was also a great devotee of God. Everyday he worked hard to make his parents as comfortable and happy. In his leisure time he prayed to God and attended to his poor, blind and aging parents.

One day his parents told him that they had become quite aged. They, therefore, wanted him to take them to the various places of pilgrimage : this could make them fully satisfied and give them abundant peace of mind. It is a typical Hindu belief that a pilgrimage to the various shrines and holy places undertaken in old age, purifies the soul and takes one nearer to one's Maker ere the icy hand of Death touches one. To a Hindu mind nothiig is more precious than becoming one with the great Maker of this Universl.

In those days means of transport were scarce and costly, and Shravan Kumar could not afford to hire them. He, therefore, decided to place his parents in two baskets and carry the baskets on his shoulder round the places of pilgrimage. He took a strong bamboo stick, at its two ends he tied the two baskets with strong ropes, and placed his father in one of the baskets and his mother in the other. Carrying on his shoulder this bamboostick with a basket at either end, Shravan started on the pilgrimage.



Shravan started on the pilgrimage

After having visited a few places of pilgrimage, he found himself on the banks of the sacred river Sharayu. Pleased with the beautiful scenery around, he decided to take a little rest there, with his parents. Shravan then placed the baskets in the shade of a tree, and after describing the beauties of the scene to his blind parents, he told them that he wanted to take a dip in the river Sharayu. The bath was sure to refresh him. His parents asked Sharavan to take his bath leisurely; they also asked him to fetch them a pitcher of water from the river, for they were feeling thirsty.

Shravan went to the river and had his dip. Now he had to fetch drinkng water for his parents, and so he dipped a pitcher into the water. As the pitcher was getting filled, there was that peculiar bubbling sound caused by the air escaping from within.

At that precise time, King Dashratha of Ayodhya, who was on a hunting expedition, happened to be near the spot. Hearing the bubbling sound, the King thought that it was caused by a deer drinking water in the river. Dashratha stood silent for a while and only with the bubbling sound to guide him, carefully took aim and shot his arrow. Indeed the arrow hit the target with precision, but the King was astonished to hear the pain-stricken screams of a human being instead of the painful cry of a dying deer. Shravan had become the target of the King's arrow. Injured fatally, he lay screaming in a pool of blood.

The King came to the spot and saw the ghastly mistake he had committed. He repented for his hasty action, but it was too late. He then placed Shravan's head on his lap, and tried to elicit some information about himself. Shravan Kumar told him that he would be dying in a few minutes, but he felt sorry for his blind parents, who were resting in the shade of the tree, waiting for his return to quench their thirst. He, therefore, requested the King to attend to his old, blind parents. Soon Saravan breathed his last.

Now the King had to perform the duties of Shravan. He lifted the pitcher and brought it to Shravan's parents and raised it up to the lips of the blind old man. The King did not utter a single word for fear of revealing the stark reality. But the parents would not take water till they heard the familiar voice of their beloved son. So they asked: "O dear son, why do you not speak today? Are you angry with us because you have to toil so much to serve up?"

At last King Dashratha had to tell them all that had happened. The parents were unable to bear the grief as their beloved son was no more. They told Dashratha that they could not live in this world without their son. They cursed the King that he, too, might meet his death caused by the sorrow of separation from his son, just as what had happened to them. Shortly afferwards both the parents passed away.

Many years passed, and Dashratha had four sons. The eldest son was Rama. In due course, Dashratha began preparing to crown Rama as the King of Ayodhya so that he could retire to the jungeles and live there a peaceful life praying to God. Now Dashratha had given two boons in the past to his wife Kaikeyi, Rama's step-mother. She insisted that the King grant her the boons before crowning Rama. The King hesitated, but had to concede in the end. She demanded that Rama be sent to the forest for fourteen years and her son Bharat be crowned as the king of Ayodhya. The shock of the thought of fourteen years' separation from his son, Rama was so great that Dashratha instantly collapsed and died. And thus the curse of Shravan Kumar's parents came true.

Each wrong is avenged, and each labour rewarded in the grand scheme of things. The story of Shravan bears this out, even as it underlines another great truth, that none, not even the king who rules over the land can escape the consequences of his action. Of course there is the question of time, but what is time when things are viewed in terms of the Infinite ?

9th STORY

NACHIKETA

A SPOKEN WORD IS AN OATH BEFORE GODS

Here is a story of ancient times. People then were really religious, they were very thoughtful in all their actions. One was fully conscious of one's duties and responsibilities. Life was so lived as to result in the maximum benefit to the maximum number of persons.

It was a well-knit society which existed in those days, each member playing his part in the most proper manner. Thus a father considered it a dereliction of his duty to be careless about his children, while a husband considered it unworthy of him to be unkind to his wife, and so on down to the last rung of the ladder, all performed their duties to the best of their abilities. The guiding motto before all in those days was : "Bahujan hitaya, Bahujan sukhaya." (the well-being and happiness of the majority).

Making donations was regarded as a great religious act at that time. There were so many ways in which to donate. One was to give half of one's total wealth;

another was to donate all of one's wealth; still another way was to give all and not to keep anything even for food and clothing, and to beg for the sake of sustaining life. There was, however, one condition : that none should know what a person had donated. This meant that the egoistic attitude was not to be developed. This was the way the people lived in ancient India.

At this time there lived a great sage by name Uddalak. He was not wealthy like other people but he had many cows. Being broad-minded he thought: "Why not donate my cows to sages and spend my life in meditation?" Uddalak had one litte son named Nachiketa, who was seven years old. The great sage decided to hold a function and at the end of it to donate his cows. He invited great spiritual teachers, sages and saints from all over the land for the function. As the function drew to a close and Uddalak started donating the cows one by one, his little son Nachiketa came and stood by his father's side. As soon as Uddalak saw his son, he became greedy; he thought. "If I donate all the cows to the sages and saints, then who will look after my son?"

Uddalak counted the saints and sages and the cows and found that there more cows than the saints; so he thought, "Why not give only the old cows to the saints and keep the good cows for my son?" So Uddalak began donating the old cows, those which were not able to walk properly and those which gave hardly any milk.

Nachiketa understood the motive of his father's action and could not tolerate the wrong act, especially on such a sacred occasion. He realised that he was the cause of it all and decided to stop such wrong acts. He stood before his father and asked "To whom are you giving me?" The father did not pay heed, being too busy donating the old cows. Nachiketa again asked the same question; he repeated his question three or four times.

Uddalak could not control himself; he became angry and hastily said that he was giving the boy to Yama Raj, King of Death. When the people heard this, they were surprised that Uddalak should speak evil words at such a sacred time. Nachiketa was prepared to go to hell and in a happy mood he started walking on the path to Hell to meet the God of Death. But the people rushed and stopped him; Uddalak also realised his mistake and he began persuading his little son to stay back. He said, "My son, you should not mind what I said you; as you know I have become old; please do not leave me: How will I spend my life without you? In a bad temper I spoke harshly to you, but you should not take it seriously. Please return home and forgive me; I had no knowledge at that time of what I was sayng. Without you how can I carry on in my old age? Remember, it is your duty to obey me—but please forgive my hasty words." And Uddalak began to weep.

But Nachiketa was firm. He could not be persuaded to stay back. Folding his hands Nachiketa said to his father: "My revered father, I was told by you that for the past twentyone generations, our ancestors never went back on then word. I would like you also to be true to your word and thus continue this sacred tradition. O my father, I do not want to disobey your orders under any circumstances. Let me follow this order and please remember that you should also be true to your own word and to go to the God of Death peacifully. I need your blessings."

Nachiketa was firm in his resolve; his father could not dissuade him with all his requests. Uddalak said, "O my dear son, how can I allow you to go to death? It is so horrible. I am unable to give you my blessings for such a thing. You are a part of my heart; I am ready for death; see my body is old and trembling and I cannot send you there. You are so young and tender and only eight years old ! Death is very vicious and cruel. O my dear son; I did a wrong thing ! I am willing to suffer whatever punishment comes to me, but I can never allow you to go to the God of Death !"

When the boy raised his head and saw that tears were flowing down the old man's cheeks, he wiped the tears with hand and said : "O my father ! I am not afraid of Death. Why are you so afraid? You should not think about me, do not worry about what will happen to me. At this moment you should remember your ancestors and how they did their sacred duty and honoured their oaths. As you know, unbecoming acts are done only by selfish people and such people can not be loved or respected. Therefore, by my action. I will prove the sanctity of your words.

"O ! my learned father, I do not have the knowledge and the courage to teach and preach to you but please remember what you told me the other day about Birth and Death. There is no such thing as permanency. Whatever we see today, tomorrow it will not be. Everything changes its shape and takes on another. The beautiful settng sun cannot remain for a long time; within seconds, it disappears and the evening sets in. But this too cannot remain. Again the powerful sun rises; with all its heart it stays but for a short time; then follows evening and then night. This Law of Change is the eternal law of Nature. You yourself were a hand some and fascinating boy once, but you could not remain long in the same condition. You were a boy, a youth and now you are an old man without knowing how it all happened. Nature does its work and we should also do our work.

"I do not think Death is so frightful. Death is the means to change the body and to acquire a new form. I was told man became immortal only through his actions. The actions of men should be such that after their death they should be remembered for their goodness. There are two ways of acting. When a man makes a personal sacrifice for the good of the people, it is remembered by them with happiness. When he acts for selfish reasons only, the people remember his action with sadness.

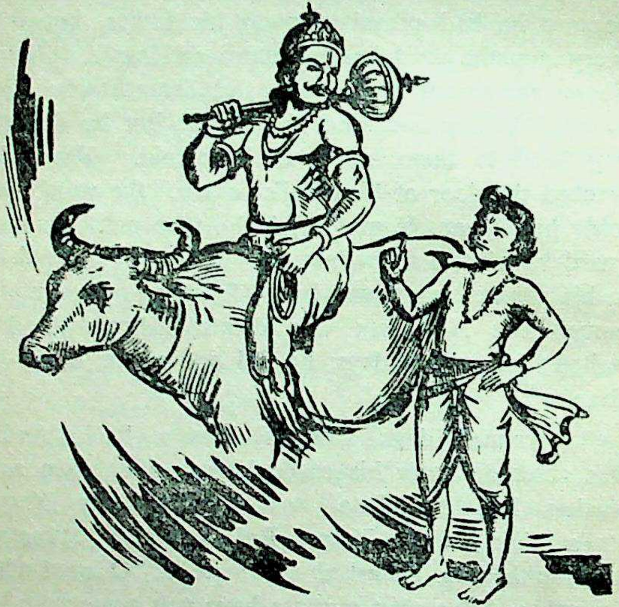
"Therefore, my father! We are both in such a predicament! If we act in one way, it is full, of selfishness and if we act in another way it is full of duty. We must do our duty, so please do not check me."

After hearing the words of his little son, the old sage could not say anything more. Nachiketa touched the feet of his father and started along the path to the Kingdom of Death. Every person present was struuk with awe and wonder at the faith and courage of this little boy who was only eigth years old. Nachiketa was full of joy as he walked away, because he had prevailed puon his father, but with every step the road became more and more difficult. There were furious animals and demons who tried to stop the boy and send him back, but he did not pay heed to them, nor was he afraid. When he reached the door of Yamaraj's castle, the watchman told him that Yama Raj had gone out. Yama's guards would not allow anyone to enter the palace in his absence, so it was better for the boy to return home. But Nachiketa was determined to wait. He waited for many days; he did not eat or drink or sleep.

After many days Yama Raj came back. As he was about to enter his castle he saw the brave and fearless lad. Nachiketa was impressed by Yama Raj's shining face. Yama Raj was also attracted towards the boy. He asked with a smile, "O boy ! who are you and for what purpose have you come here ?" Without waiting for Nachiketa's answer, one of the watchmen said, "Sire, this little boy spent many days waiting for your return; he did not eat or drink or sleep."

Yamaraj's heart was touched; he rushed to the boy and embraced him saying, "Oh ma 'dear boy ! who are you ? For what have you come here ?

Please tell me immediately. I will not have any food or drink until I have attended to your needs. Nachiketa was pleased to hear these words of Yama Raj. He had been told that the king of Death was cruel and furious. On the contrary, the boy found him kinder than most other gods and goddesses.



Yamaraj has no terror for Nachiketa

Nachiketa explained everything about his father and the purpose of his coming. "I have been given to you by my father in the sacred ritual as a donation. I request you to accept me and bless my father. Let him complete his sacred way of life and allow me the opportunity of serving you." Yamaraj became very pleased on hearing about the behaviour of the father and the son. He thought, "This is the first time in my life that a son has been donated to me by his lovely son and the son is of the same high standard to come to me. Both these souls are noble to me."

Then Yamaraj said loudly, "O, my dear little boy! I am very sorry you found great difficulty at my door because of my absence. But I am pleased by your brave behaviour and I would like to give you a gift. Whatever you require, tell me without any hesitation." The lad did not speak for some time and then he said, "O Sir, I am your servant, I do not have much ability. You should not give me a gift unless I do some worthy act." But again Yamaraj said, "O my boy, you are not wanting in anything. This is the reason why you deserve the gift. You must ask for whatever you want, because I am bound to give it to you."

Now Nachiketa had to ask for something. He said, "O Sire! I was the only son of my father. There is nobody else to help him, no one to serve him. He is very old and decrepit; his body becomes weaker and weaker day by day; therefore the first gift I would like from you is that you give my father good health so that he would never become sick and would always be mentally and physically strong. He must cease worrying about me and he must not be angry with me."

Yamaraj said: "So be it, so be it! Your dear father will get whatever he wants to make his life peaceful. You should now ask ask for something else."

This time Nachiketa said: "O Sire! I have heard that life in heaven is very pleasant and you have the knowledge of Heaven. It is this knowledge that I would like to learn." Yamaraj thought that Nachiketa was the real and ideal student to whom he could teach the knowledge of Heaven. The boy had deep interest for the right knowledge. He had the good sense to respect his father, mother and the older people. This was the first time that Yamaraj had such a capable student whom he could teach the knowledge of Heaven. He said to the boy, "O, my dear Nachiketa, you will learn this knowledge from me slowly. But in the meantime you may ask for another gift. When the boy was told to ask for a third gift he said, "Sire, I have a wish for only one more gift—I have a keen desire to know the reality of life."

After hearing of the third gift of Nachiketa, the God of Death became very surprised because he had never even dreamt that this type of gift would be asked for by this little boy who knew nothing about worldly affairs. Then Yamaraj tried to persuade him. "O my dear boy, as you know I am the god of Death, but not a god of life; I do not know anything about life. I do not think this subject is worthy of you. It is a worthless thing; please ask for another gift, something I can give you. The gift you asked for is beyond my power and my knowledge. The subject is not connected with me.

The boy, however, remained firm on his request and would not change. Yamaraj said, "If you want wealth I can make you rich; if you want health I can make you strong and the mightiest of the mighty. If you want intellectual power I can make you intelligent in respect of all kinds of knowledge, but ask not for the knowledge of Life."

But young Nachiketa persisted and so Yamaraj had to yield in the end. The God of Death taught him the knowledge of Life.

After teaching him the knowledge of Life Yamaraj said to Nachiketa, "Now I am pleased with you, you can go back to your home and help your father and make him satisfied with you and happy."

A spoken word, it is said, is as good as an oath. To break a given word is considered unbecoming of a man of character. Though a lad of seven summers, Nachiketa was well aware of this truth. Indian tradition gives pride of place to this virtue. There are cases in which people have sacrificed their lives for being true to their word. A name that comes easily to one's mind is that of Karna, the hero of the Mahabharata. Coming to Nachiketa, we see how he practised this virtue with a thoroughness which earned him such rich rewards as would be envied by many.

10th STORY

SATYAKAM

SALVATION THROUGH TENDING COWS

Our ancient system of Education was completely different from the modern one. Students in those days had their education in Ashramas. They used to sit and study under the trees or in huts. The teacher allowed them to study till he was completely satisfied with the knowledge gained by them. Only then did he allow the students to go home and live the life of householders.

Gautam Rishi was teaching some students in his Ashrama. One day a boy came there and saluted the Rishi by prostrating before him. In Sanskrit such prostration is called *Sashtang Dandvat Pranama*. He lay there like a stick, with his face down, both hands folded saluting the teacher. This was the mode of saluting the teacher in ancient India. The boy appeared healthy and cheerful. He attracted the attention of the students present there. With folded hands he said to Gautam Rishi: "Sire, I have come here to learn. Please accept me as your student. I will follow your advice faithfully." When they heard this, the other students became surprised and some even laughed, because he was the only boy who had come to the Ashrama without being escorted by his parents Other students had been brought by their parents.

Moreover, the newcomer displayed no signs of belonging to a rich and prosperous family. He was poorly dressed, though physically he appeared healthy, and mentally keen and alert. The students of the Ashrama thought: Here is a boy of ten years, but without the sacred thread around his neck, or the deer-skin on his shoulder. Either something is wrong with his family or something is wrong with him.' Soon some students began to make fun of him, but Gautam Rishi gave a stern look at the boys in order to rebuke them. Turning to the newcomer the Rishi said : "Young one, you have done a good thing by coming here in search of knowledge. Tell me, where is your father? To which family do you belong? I will certainly give you as much knowledge as you can absorb." In reply the boy said humbly : "Sire, I have not seen my father and I do not even know his name; I will ask my mother and only then can I tell you my father's name." Hearing the boy's answer, the other students began to laugh. They said among themselves: "Look here! There are people who do not even know their parents' name. He is one of them. Still they come here to learn spiritual knowledge." Presently, one boy stood up and asked the teacher: "Sire, can anyone who does not even know the name of his father also learn here?" The teacher replied: "For one without a father

I act as one, and he may get all sorts of knowledge without any hesitation in my Ashrama."

Gautam Rishi then said to the boy: "You should go and get from your mother the name of your father and also your surname. Indeed these particulars are needed for performing your thread ceremony. Go to your mother just now and return by tomorrow morning; for tomorrow is a good day for the thread ceremony." The boy saluted the teacher and the students, and hurried off to his mother to get his father's name.

The next morning the boy came back to the Ashrama when the teacher was taking the class. He saluted the teacher and stood in one corner. Gautam Rishi bade him sit down and said: "Did you ask your mother the name of your father and your surname?" The boy stood up and replied: "Yes, Sir, I asked my mother. She said that she did not know my father's name either. In her youth she was serving the sages and saints when she conceived. She confessed she did not know the name and surname of the man whose child she bore. She wanted me to tell you this. If by mother's name anything could be done, she asked me to tell you that her name is 'Jabala' This is all that my mother told me. Now what is more, dear sir, I am prepared to follow your advice." The students were surprised on hearing the words of the boy.

Gautam Rishi said: "My dear boy! I am extremely pleased with you. This is the first opportunity in my life to meet a boy like you. My heart is full of joy. From today, I am both your father and teacher. Now you do not have to say that you do not know your father's name. I believe my Ashrama will become brighter by your presence. I am naming you Satyakam Jabala, and I will teach you all that you are capable of learning on the spiritual path." The teacher then explained to the other students: "Today I will make him my disciple by performing the thread ceremony. I want all of you to go and collect the essential things for the ceremony."

At the appointed holy hour the thread ceremony was performed, with the Rishi's wife putting the sacred thread around the boy's neck, and Gautam Rishi accepting Satyakam as his disciple.

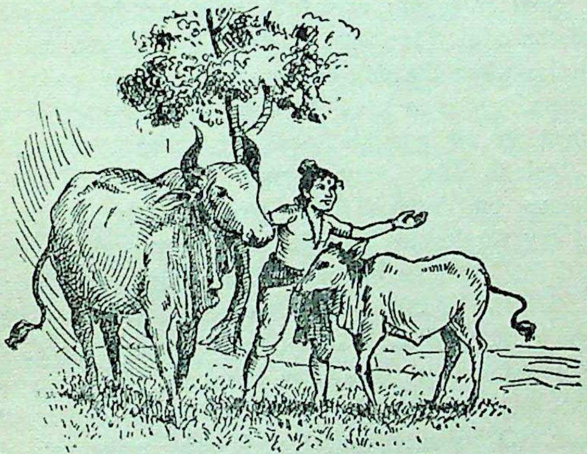
Only four days had passed after Satyakam started living in the Ashrama. He soon won the affection of all, by his pleasing behaviour and gentle manners. The teacher had come to know, by this time, that he was the only student who could do something worthwhile. Therefore, one day he called all the students together and said to Satyakam: "Satyakam, today I shall give you some very simple and easy work which is going to take you away from this place." Actually it was a very difficult task that the teacher had thought of, but he wanted to let the other students know that they were not prepared for it. Therefore, he described it as a simple task. Said Satyakam: "Respected Sir, I am always ready to go wherever you want to send me, and do whatever you want me to do. It is my great fortune to have the opportunity of receiving your order." Gautam Rishi continued: "My dear Satyakam! As you know, at present there is hardly any grass available in this place for our cows. Our cows are day by day becoming weaker and weaker. So, I have decided that you should take four hundred cows from here and move them somewhere else in the forest where grass and water are available in plenty. When these cows multiply and become one thousand, you should bring them back to the Ashrama. I think only you can accomplish this task. What do you think? Let me know."

Satyakam humbly replied : "Sir, I am indeed fortunate to get the opportunity to receive your order. But I still feel a little uneasy that you should doubt my loyalty." Another student interrupted : "Sir, Satyakam is a very small boy. How can he control four hundred cows?" At this another student got up and said: "Sir, our cows are very troublesome. Satyakam alone will not be able to control them. He requires the assistance of a few friends. Besides there are wild animals which may attack our cows. Kindly let more students go with him."

But Satyakam answered : "My dear friends, I have such power that none can disturb me. By the grace of God and blessings of Gautam Rishi, all troubles will disappear and the wild animals will turn into friends of our cows. I think, fear is only in one's mind. If you want to run, then fear will follow you, and if you are prepared to suffer, then fear will not be there."

Hearing the courageous words of Satyakam, Gautam Rishi was very pleased and praised the enthusiasm of the young disciple, saying : "Whatever you say, Satyakam, is absolutely correct. I am sure you will be able to serve our cows and there will be no difficulty." Satyakam bowed at the feet of Rishi Gautam; after that he touched the feet of Gautam's wife and took from her some food to be had on the way. Then bidding goodbye to his fellow-students, he set out with four hundred cows in search of green pastures.

Here was a quest, a wandering, with no other purpose than that of saving the dumb animals from starvation and slow death. All that Satyakam needed was ample grass and plenty of water anywhere under the benevolent blue sky. Nothing would please him more than seeing his cows well-fed and contented. This became his prayer as the herd moved on; sometimes he would walk in front of the herd, sometimes he would be seen in the rear: four



In the company of cows and calves

hundred cows and one young boy, out to seek the bounty of Mother Nature to whom no child is unwanted—neither quadruped, nor biped.

As if Mother Nature smiled on them, Satyakam soon came to a place where grass and water were available in plenty. He decided to stay with his four hundred friends. As the cows began grazing Satyakam busied himself in building a hut for himself where he could pray and meditate.

Now Satyakam was fully absorbed in the service of the cows. He was so busy that he did not even notice when the day began and the night ended. His sole aim was to keep the cows in a state of contentment in all possible ways. If some cows fell ill. Satyakam was very upset. He took all the blame on himself. He thought: 'Is it because of my carelessness? Otherwise, how could my cows fall ill?' And he did not forget to pray to God: 'O God! You should punish me alone; whatever illness you want to give, I am prepared to undergo it. But you should not make my cows ill. They are innocent animals; they do not know how to express their pain. O my supreme God! Kindly make my cows healthy.' Satyakam's prayers were answered, and the sick cows soon became healthy, and the colony of cows flourished. Their number too increased.

Many years passed and the number of cows increased to over one thousand, but Satyakam did not notice it, as he was totally absorbed in their service. One day when he was performing his spiritual practices, in the morning, he heard a human voice nearby, and was startled. When he turned towards the cows, he saw a bull who was the leader of the cows calling to Satyakam in words like a human being. Satyakam folded his hands in salutation and said: "O my Lord, what is your order? What can I do for you? Order me, and I will obey."

The leader of the cows said: "O Satyakam! As you know I am the Lord of cows, I am pleased with your service and sacrifice. I have come here to teach you spiritual knowledge. By my blessings you will obtain all branches of knowledge which none else can get, even after several years of penance. You do not know that your cows have become more than one thousand. Take them to your teacher, Gautam Rishi, as he will be happy to receive you." After saying these words the Lord of the cows disappeared.

Now Satyakam remembered the words of Gautam Rishi about returning to the Ashrama. He gathered his cows and proceeded to the Ashrama, which he reached before sunset. When Gautam Rishi and the Ashrama students saw Satyakam with the large number of cows, they were very pleased. Gautam Rishi welcomed him saying: "Satyakam, I am so happy to have you amidst us in the Ashrama. I am sure our cows are now more than one thousand. I think you have met some sage there who has taught you spiritual knowledge." In humble words Satyakam replied: "Sir, one day before coming here, the Lord of the cows blessed me and assured me of his guidance in the matter of spiritual knowledge. He said he was pleased with my service and sacrifice for the cows."

Hearing these words Gautam Rishi said: "My dear boy, by your truthfulness and sacrifice, you succeeded in your work, and the Lord of the cows was pleased to bless you. I am doubly pleased that you are a student of my Ashrama." Satyakam reverentially touched the feet of Gautam and said that it was all due to the Rishi's kind grace without which nothing was possible. Gautam Rishi assured him that whatever he needed to learn of the spiritual path, he had already learnt, and added: "Now you should go home. Your mother has been waiting for you for several years. Live like a householder." Satyakam once again saluted Gautam Rishi and taking leave of him, walked out of the Ashrama.

Thus we see in the story of Satyakam, that no work is too lowly if the aim is spiritual progress. What would appear to most of us as a drab and uninteresting task, like tending cows, yielded rich dividends to young Satyakam. This only shows that in the great scheme of things—which we call the Universe—with life pulsating in all beings, each and every bit of work is equally important, just as each and every brick is essential for the existence of a building. When the work is done with a sense of dedication, what a difference it creates! In fact it no longer is work, but transforms itself into worship.

11th STORY

BHEESHMA

A GREAT SACRIFICE

According to Indian tradition, parents, teachers and guests are placed on a par with God. Service to one's parents is greater than the worship of God; service to one's teacher is higher than devotion to God, and service to a guest is superior to surrender to God. The life of Bheeshma is a classic example of a son's devotion to his father.

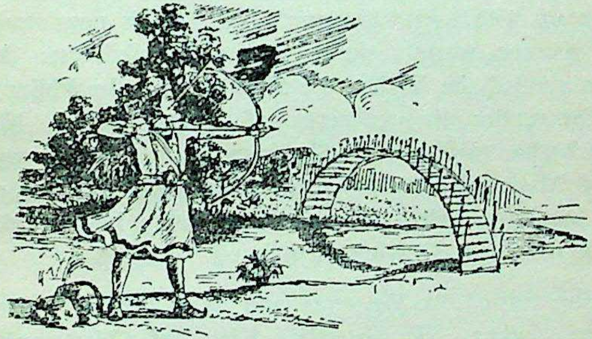
About 3000 years before Christ, modern Delhi used to be called Hastinapur. The King of Hastinapur was Shantanu. King Shantanu was as great as the heavenly King Indra. Shantanu was very fond of hunting. One day he went on a hunting expedition with his ministers and some of his well-wishers. He was riding along the bank of the River Ganga, when his eyes fell on a very beautiful girl. Shantanu wanted to know her name. He addressed the girl: "Oh Devi! May I know your name, and also whether you belong to heaven or earth? Till now I have not seen such beauty in a human being. I feel you and I are related in some previous life. May I know what you are doing here?" The girl said her name was Ganga. And she continued: "Oh King! If I am right, you are King Shantanu, Ruler of Hastinapur. I was told by the Gods that I should select you as my life-partner on one condition. You will not object to whatever I may do after we are married; nor ever make any attempt to check me. As long as you follow this promise I will be your wife. The moment you break this promise I shall no longer be your wife."

Shantanu accepted the condition and made Ganga his wife and brought her to his palace. They lived happily together. After a year, Ganga gave birth to a son, but she soon took the baby in her arms, walked to the river and threw the baby into the raging torrent. When King Shantanu heard about this, he felt very sad, but did not say anything because of his promise at the time of his marriage.

Ganga bore him seven children but all these suffered the same fate as the first child. Shantanu could not do anything in the matter. He became more and more sad as the years rolled by.

After some time Ganga gave birth to a son—the eighth one. The little baby was not like a normal human baby; he looked like a god, so fair and so handsome. Seeing the baby-boy Shantanu was both pleased and worried, for that child might again be killed by his wife Ganga. But this time Shantanu decided that at any cost, he would not allow her to throw the baby into the river. When Ganga took the child into her arms and started walking towards the river, Shantanu cried out to her: "Where are you taking him, O Mother of the lovely child! Kill not at least this one, I beg of you." Ganga turned back and stood silent. After a while she spoke: "My dear Lord, you have broken your promise and so I must leave you. I do not want to live with a man who is unable to keep his word. I will take this child along with me, and I will return him to you at the proper time so that he may fulfil his destiny." So saying Ganga disappeared with the child.

For some time Shantanu remained very sad. There was nothing in his life which could amuse him. He was always thinking of his wife Ganga and the child she took with her. Gradually he tried to forget his grief and started attending to his royal duties.



Building a bridge with arrows

One day, he again went out hunting with his ministers, along the bank of the river, when they suddenly saw that the river Ganga had stopped flowing. They were naturally surprised and they wanted to find out the reason. As they moved forward, they saw a handsome boy who was busy sending arrow after arrow into the water. He was building a dam of arrows to stop the flow of the river. Seeing this remarkable feat of archery, Shantanu could hardly believe his eyes. The boy looked like a god, with his face bright and lustrous. His physique was as majestic as a lion's. He was fully absorbed in archery. Seeing him King Shantanu said to himself: "I cannot imagine who this celestial god could be." As they were all wondering who this boy could be, there appeared Mother Ganga and she told the King that the boy was his son. She said: 'His name is Devavrat. I have brought him up with great care, my Lord. He is now ready to assume worldly duties and responsibilities; he has studied the Vedas, the Shastras and the Philosophies under the guidance of great teachers like Vashistha, Brihaspati, Shankaracharya, Parashuram and Markandeya. He has also mastered the use of all weapons. He knows the duties of a king. Take him with you, O King Shantanu."

She turned to Devavrat and said: "Now, follow your father. He is the King of Hastinapur. He has come to take you home." Devavrat asked his mother: "Is not this river my home?" And Ganga replied: "Yes, of course; it will be your home, when you sleep finally, but before that, you should fulfil your destiny, my son." Young Devavrat rushed to Mother Ganga and embraced her. She again told him to do his duty and prove worthy of his teachers and parents. Devavrat followed King Shantanu, and Mother Ganga was in tears, seeing them depart.

King Shantanu took his son home and crowned him as heir. Now Devavrat became the crown-prince of Hastinapur, and Shantanu thought of retiring. He wanted to devote most of his time for meditation and worship.

All said and done, Shantanu was a King, given to a royal way of living. Always fond of hunting, he again went out one day into a forest with his trusted retinue. Somewhere in the deep forest, Shantanu became aware of a lovely fragrance. He wanted to find out the source of this scent. He soon discovered that the scent emanated from the body of a maiden. She was Satyavati, daughter of a fisherman. King Shantanu introduced himself to the maiden saying: "O Sweet Maiden! I am King Shantanu of Hastinapur. May I request you to be my queen?" Satyavati smiled and turned her face to another side. Then she said to Shantanu : "O King! I am the daughter of a fisherman. I wonder how you could accept me as the queen." Saying this Satyavati ran to inform her father.

As soon as the fisherman heard the news, he rushed to meet the the King. Saluting the King reverentially the fisherman said; "O King! I will be very pleased to give my daughter to you in marriage, but there will be only one condition. It is but natural for a father to think about the future of his daughter. I have some ambitions about my daughter. The son she will bear you, must be the king after you. If you agree to this condition, I shall be happy to celebrate my daughter's marriage with you."

When he heard this condition of the fisherman, Shantanu became very sad as he was already bound to make Devavrat the future king. He returned disappointed, but try as he did, he could not forget Satyavati. He was gloomy all the time. When Devavrat saw this, he wanted to know the cause of his father's grief. But Shantanu did not say anything to Devavrat. So the latter had to find out everything from those who had gone with the king on the hunting expedition.

With his minister and aides, Devavrat drove to meet Satyavati and her father. He requested her father to give Satyavati in marriage to Shantanu. "I am Devavrat, Shantanu's son by his previous wife, Ganga. I am ready to promise you whatever you want, but you should fulfil my father's desire", said Devavrat. The fisherman replied: "Why don't you marry my daughter, young man? I have no conditions so far as you are concerned."

"Impossible, fisherman, impossible" Devavrat burst out. "Out of the question. It is my sacred duty to make my father happy."

"If you have decided to make him happy, there is only one condition on which I am particular. My daughter's son should be the king after your father," said the fisherman.

Devavrat replied happily: "O fisherman! It is such a small thing. Gladly do I renounce the throne today. I do not want to be the king at all. If there is anything more that you need, please tell me now. I shall give you whatever is in my possession."

After hearing the great vow of Devavrat, the fisherman said: "O noble Prince! You are the great son of a great father; therefore you could renounce your claim to the throne for the sake of your father. But what about your children? They may not be like you. Maybe they could take the throne by force from my daughter's heirs. And so how could I give my daughter in marriage to your father?"

Devavrat thought for a while and said: "I understand your fears, O fisherman. Whatever sacrifice is required for the sake of my father, I am prepared to make it. I will move heaven and earth if by doing so my father will be happy. I now swear, O fisherman, that from today, throughout my life, I will follow complete Brahmacharya (celibacy). No woman shall come into my life, no woman shall enter my mind and no woman shall appear even in my dreams. Gods, Goddesses and Elements are witnesses to my vow!" As he finished uttering such a terrible vow, the very horizon echoed with the sound of 'Bheeshma! Bheeshma! Bheeshma!' which in Sanskrit means **terrible.** Gods and Goddesses showered flowers on him from heaven. Since that day Devavrat was called Bheeshma.

The old fisherman arranged his daughter's marriage with King Shantanu. The king was very pleased with Bheeshma. Shantanu blessed his son saying: "Death will not come to you, my son; you will live as long as you wish." Shantanu had two sons by his new Queen Satyavati. Their names were Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Both children were brought up under the guidance of Bheeshma who meticulously trained them in all sorts of skills.

After some time King Shantanu died and Chitrangada, the elder son of Satyavati, became the king. But there was a war between Chitrangada and the Gandharvas and the former was killed on the battle-field. So the younger brother, Vichitravirya, was made the king. Unfortunately he became ill and soon died. Now Satyavati was very unhappy as there was no heir to the throne. It occurred to her that Bheeshma could be asked to become the king, for was he not the original heir to the throne? She pleaded: "O Bheeshma! You should become the king of our kingdom and you should also marry so that our lineage could be saved."

But Bheeshma said to Satyavati: "O dear mother! What you say is perfectly correct. But as you know, I had given the vow to your father that I would neither become the king nor would I marry. How can I break my vow? The sun may give up its glory, the moon its lustre and the fire its heat, but Bheeshma can never break his word."

Thus the great Bheeshma lived to a ripe old age, respected by his people and revered by all. His name became a living legend.

12th STORY

LORD RAMA

AMONG MEN A PRINCE,
AMONG PRINCES A KING.

King Dasharatha was the mighty ruler of Ayodhya. He was very kind to his subjects whose well-being was his main concern. There used to be no untimely deaths in Dasharatha's kingdom, nor famines and pestilences. The King spared no efforts to make his people more prosperous and happy. Indeed he lived only for his people. There, however, was one thing which often worried the great King. As it had relevance to the future of his people, the King's worry was not something that affected only his personal life. The question that vexed him constantly was: "Who would look after his people in future?" Dasharatha had no issue and thus there would be no future claimant to the throne. A people without a king, that too a king duly trained since childhood for the great responsibilities of ruling over a kingdom ......No, No, Dasharatha was never prepared for such a situation to take place after him. He was, therefore, desperate to find some way out.

It was no ordinary problem which the King faced; nevertheless he had to solve it. As it was the practice in those days to consult the Rishis in all difficult circumstances. Dasharatha approached the Divine Sage Vashistha for proper guidance. The King knew that the Rishi would never fail him, as there would be no two opinions regarding the well-being of a people. Sage Vashistha appreciated the King's viewpoint, and after due thought suggested as a way-out Putra Yaga — a religious ceremony to propitiate the gods and beget sons. The suggestion was gratefully accepted, and soon under the guidance of Sage Vashistha the said Yaga was performed in a grand manner. All the great spiritual teachers of the time, Sages, Saints, Rishis, Maharishis, Brahmarishis and others graced the occasion with their presence. Putra-Yaga was completed successfully and the King was directed to distribute the 'Prasad' (holy offering) among his three queens—Kausalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra. Dasharatha was the happy recipient of the hearty blessings of one and all on this great occasion.

In time, King Dasharatha became the proud father of four sons. The child born to Queen Kausalya was named Rama, Queen Kaikeyi's child was called Bharat and the twins born to Queen Sumitra were named Lakshman and Shatrughna. Because of their auspicious origin, much was expected of these four children. The King wanted to provide them with the best of education. It was again to sage Vashistha's care that the children were entrusted when they were of school-going age. If the children owed their physical Birth to the great suggestion of Putra-Yaga made by the Sage, the King desired that their intellectual and spiritual birth, too, should take place under the guidance of the very Sage. The King had absolute trust in Vashistha; he knew that only Vashistha was capable of effecting in his sons an all-round development which would bring out the best in them for their onerous duties as the future rulers of Ayodhya. Sage Vashistha set about the task in the true Yoga tradition which aims at the all-round development of both the body and the mind. He began with the four *purusharthas* (motivations) from which sprang all our activities. Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha are the four motivations. Dharma more or less means Duty. There are duties to oneself and there are duties to others, viz, parents, members of family, relatives, neighbours and all the rest of the society. No one lives in isolation; since living means sharing with others something or the other, duty confronts one at every step. A weak person can do no justice to his duties. Everyone, therefore, owes it to himself to acquire sound health. Only a healthy person could aspire to be efficient and dexterous in his work. Archery, horse-riding, swimming and Asanas are needed for the sake of sound physical health, but these alone are not sufficient when internal health is taken into account. The yoga education which began with Asanas had to be followed by *Pranayama*—the control of *Prana* (vital energy) primarily through breathing exercises. The practice of Asanas and Pranayama helps one acquire (1) *Arogya*—good health, (2) *Deha Shuddhi*—biological control, (3) *Chirayuvan*—eternal youth, (4) *Chirayu*—longevity,

(5) *Nadishuddhi*—nerve control (6) *Chitta Shuddhi*—mind control, (7) *Yogachaar*—moral behaviour, (8) *Samyam*—meditation and (9) *Samadhi*—trans-consciousness, the ultimate aim of Yaga.

Together with Asanas and Pranayama, one should also be thorough with the six internal purificatory processes, called *SAT KARMAS*. They are called in Sanskrit: *Nauli*, *Dhauti*, *Tratak*, *Kapalabhati*, *Basti* and *Neti*. By these practices, organs like the stomach, liver, lungs and heart get cleansed of toxins, thus resulting in their greater efficiency. Sublimation of energies becomes easy for one who practises Sat Karmas besides Asanas and Pranayama.

One should turn now to the mind. A correct code of conduct should engage one's attention at this stage. There are certain Do's and Dont's which together go to make the code of conduct for any member of society. The DON'Ts are: (1) *Ahimsa*—non-violence, (2) *Satya*—truthfulness, (3) *Brahmacharya*—celibacy, (4) *Asteya*—nonstealing and (5) *Aparigraha*—non-covetting what belongs to others. The DO's again are five in number: (1) *Swach*—cleanliness of body, mind and thoughts, (2) *Santosh*—contentment, (3) *Tapas*—austerity, (4) *Swadhyaya*—self-study and (5) *Ishwar-Pranidhan*—surrender to the Absolute. The observance of these negative and positive virtues is bound to invest one with profound tranquility. Only such a mind could fathom the depths of meditation.

It is thus seen that in Yoga education Dharma occupies a pride of place. As the Sanskrit saying goes, *DHARAYETI DHARMA*—which means that Dharma is that which holds things together. Indeed does it hold together, not only one in a society, but also the different aspects of a person, so that there can be a harmonious fulfilment of all one's endeavours.

Then there are the three other motivations—Artha, Kama and Moksha. It is necessary that these too are understood in the context of one's actions, with the ultimate aim of mind control.

The four sons of King Dasharatha were thus fittingly educated and trained by Sage Vashistha for their roles as the future rulers of the kingdom. They had well-shaped bodies with power-packed muscles while at the same time they had all the rich qualities which would enable them to rise to any occasion in the course of life. Whatever might be the demands, the princes would not be found wanting. Their training in Vashistha's forest Ashram took nearly twelve years. The Sage who had seen them grow under his loving care from little children to their late teens sent them back to the King's palace with all his blessings. The parting was indeed painful for all of them, but the Sage consoled them saying that the training he had given them would stand them in good stead. King Dasharatha who had been waiting for their return all these years was greatly pleased to have all his sons back with him. Tears of joy ran down his cheeks as he saw the young handsome princes with their bright faces—a feast for his eyes indeed. He knew it was the right time to crown his eldest son, Rama, as the King of Ayodhya, so that he could retire and spend the remainder of his life in spiritual contemplation.

Of all the sons of Dasharatha, Rama, the eldest, soon became popular with one and all. He was a skilled archer; even at that young age he had acquired a reputation for his mastery in the use of the bow and arrow. He had great compassion for others. The people of Ayodhya very much liked the young prince, and they eagerly looked forward to his coronation as the King. They knew they would have no cause to worry, with Rama as their benevolent ruler.

The Rakshasas had by then grown vastly in number and no forest Ashram seemed safe and free from their harrassment and terror. The sages could not freely perform their daily religious rites like *havans*, for fear of the Rakshasas desecrating the site with filth and excreta. Any act of self-defence by the sages was very much resented by the Rakshasas who looked upon it as an opportunity to indulge in bloodshed and killings. If prayers and meditation meant for the sages the realisation of a great privilege, the Rakshasas found their life's fulfilment in harrassing them in more ways than one, which often culminated in the murder of many a sage in the most barbarous fashion. The forests where Peace once reigned supreme, where a man could sit down for a quiet communion with his Maker, now echoed to the death agonies of many a sage and the derisive ghoulish laughter of the demons. Blood flowed freely in the sylvan settings.

The sages became desparate as the situation steadily grew intolerable. Realising that only the armed might of a King could put an end to this menace, they sent Sage Vishwamitra to report the matter to King Dasharatha and secure his speedy help.

"Only a skilled warrior could solve this problem" explained Vishwamitra to the King, "for the Rakshasas are very ferocious and their capacity to harm is immense. Let it not be said of Dasharatha by posterity that during his rule the sgaes could not be protected from the menace of the Rakshasas."

The King heard Vishwamitra with great attention. He felt sorry that these happenings took place in his old age. No such occurrences took place when he was young, when the mere mention of his name was enough to strike terror in the hearts of the evil-doers. Who did not know that he was called Dasharatha because of his ability to move the chariot in all directions with lightning speed, and deal very effectively with his adversaries. But now things were different. The King had aged and his physical prowess was no longer so effective. The Rakshasas took advantage of this and chose to strike. Like ferocious beasts in the absence of the hunter, they enjoyed themselves at the expense of sages and saints.

Dasharatha perfectly understood the situation. Despite his aged and weak frame, he was mentally alert and sharp. He was fully conscious of his duty to protect his subjects—indeed it was his sacred *dharma.* But his age was the only hitch. He knew that the situation called for the physical presence at the trouble spot of a youthful warrior. How, then was he to solve this problem? Apparently there seemed no ready answer to the problem and the King seemed a little confused. For some moments silence reigned surpreme.

Sage Vishwamitra appeared to have read the King's thoughts. So he came forth with the suggestion that the King's eldest son Rama be entrusted with the task. Proceeding, the Sage urged upon the King to take a decision immediately as the situation was indeed critical.

At the mention of Rama's name, the Kng's face did not light up with enthusiasm. Rather it became more palid, indeed even a little gloomy. Certainly the King entertained no doubts about Rama's capacity to teach the Rakshasas the lesson of their life. The ends of royal duty too would be met if Rama were entrusted with the task. Verily Sage Vishwamitra's suggestion seemed to be ideal in the circumstances. And yet the King hesitated. For he was worried that that would mean a spell of separation again from his beloved son who had rejoined him but recently on completion of his training under Vashistha. Old Dasharatha desired nothing more than the company of his son, and there was nothing he detested more than separation from him. A fear always tormented his mind ever since the parents of Shravana had cursed him for killing their son—the fear that in his old age he would somehow be starved of his son's affection. Whenever anyone suggested a task which necessitated his son's separation from him, that fear would again raise its head, almost paralysing his mind. Who could tell how long the anti-Rakshasa expedition would take? It might be three months or even three years, for once undertaken the task had to be seen to the end. Were the King's plans for Rama's coronation, then, to be held in abeyance? The King was undecided. He remained tongue-tied.

What was transpiring at the King's Court was being closely watched by the leading officers of the realm. Rama too was there, observing the proceedings from the front row. He was now nineteen and could well sympathise with the feelings of his aged father. At the same time he could also appreciate the sacred duties enjoined on a king. A chip of the old block, Rama could perfectly understand and appreciate the agony and conflict raging in Dasharatha's mind. As the King lapsed into silence, and Sage Vishwamitra and other courtiers remained glued to their seats, not knowing what to do, Rama slowly rose to his feet, and addressing himself to the King, thus spoke aloud: "Permit me, Father, to say a few words in this connection. My submission is that the safety of our subjects is the paramount need of the hour. As the wise Sage Vishwamitra has suggested, I am quite confident of tackling the problem. Every other consideration has to be set aside for the sake of the safety of our subjects. Father, I entreat you to permit me to go with Sage Vishwamitra immediately."

Rama's words had an electrifying effect on the Court. All faces lighted up with appreciation for the heir-apparent who had shown such a profound consideration for his suffering subjects even at so youthful an age. In hushed mono-syllables, many gave vent to their appreciation, to be followed by broad wreathes of smiles lighting every face, as it were to say: 'Rama indeed is a born king'. The mood of the Court indeed became so infectious that Dasharatha too found himself smiling along with others. The King was heartily in agreement with his courtiers that Rama was bound to be a great king. In a sense he was glad of what had happened, for it had revealed in a flash the native greatness of his heir-apparent. So intense seemed to be his feelings that Dasharatha forgot his personal problem of having to face separation from Rama, and he now readily permitted him to accompany Sage Vishwamitra to the forests. He also asked his second son, Lakshman to go along with him.

The Rakshasa annihilation expedition became a great success, a personal triumph for Rama. Not even one Rakshasa could stand up to his physical prowess or put up any opposition worth the name. Rama's arrow, which was soon to be famous as 'Ram-baan', knocked many a Rakshasa out of existence, while those who managed to survive in combat, managed to make themselves scarce with all speed and hurry, claiming discretion to be the better part of valour. All the sages and saints profusely thanked Rama the deliverer, showered their blessings upon him, and wished him all success and happiness in life.

His assignment over, Rama sought the permission of the Sage Vishwamitra to return to the palace. The latter was all for sending him back to his aged father at the earliest, for had he not seen with his own eyes the agony experienced by King Dasharatha when Rama was to leave him. He ardently wished for a re-union of both of them and looked forward to giving a shape to his desire. Since, however, he had just then received an invitation to attend the *Swayamwara* of King Janaka's daughter, Sita, he thought it better to take the handsome prince Rama along with him. Perhaps Rama might win the hand of Princess Sita, as *Swayamwara* meant a type of marriage in which the 'groom would be chosen for his merits proved in a test specially designed for the purpose.'

On his own Rama would not have attended the function. True, he was the most eligible bachelor of his time, but he had been so occupied in the service of others that he hardly found time to think of his personal happiness. This trait runs as a red thread through all his life, the dedication of his whole being to the betterment and happiness of others. Vishwamitra had by now been sufficiently well acquainted with Rama to know this trend in the Prince's character. It was this that led the Sage now to take Rama to the *Swayamwara*. The step was so suddenly taken that the Prince was on the scene even before he realised what it was all about. Once he was there, Rama, like all eligible bachelors, had to go through the list. He could not shirk it more so because in the vast concourse there seemed to be none fit enough to succeed in a test which called for the lifting of a huge bow and servicing it into action. Even the mighty Ravana, who was one of the distinguished invitees failed in the test.

Seeing that no one seemed to succeed, King Janaka became visibly worried at the bleak prospect of his daughter remaining unwed. Vishwamitra now sensed the need of the hour and encouraged Rama to go through the test and rise equal to the occasion, to prove the efficacy of the Yoga precept '*Yogah Karmasu Koushalam*' (One becomes dextrous in one's action through Yoga).

It was in deference to the wishes of the Sage that Rama now stepped forward to enter the lists.

Once he was in it, he had to apply himself wholeheartedly to the task, in the true Yoga tradition. He not only lifted the mighty bow, but began pressing it into service so forcefully that the bow gave way and broke into two. Thundrous was the acclamation that greeted the mighty feat, the gathering with one voice declaring him the winner of the day and the test. It was only now that Rama realised the full implications of his feat of valour: all on a sudden, he had become a bridegroom. Sage Vishwamitra became eminently satisfied that things had turned out precisely as he had wished them to. The marriage of Rama and Sita was soon celebrated in a grand manner. The other sons of Dasharatha too were then married. King Janaka was never tired of thanking Vishwamitra time and again for this happy turn of events he had so ably brought about.

Dasharatha was now all set and all earnestness about Rama's coronation. He wanted to have the function at the earliest lest some obstacle delay it, a fear he always harboured. The royal astrologers were consulted and a date was announced for the ceremony. Wild was the jubilation at the announcement, and the people of Ayodhya went about in all enthusiasm decorating the city befitting the festive occasion. What with all gay decorations, the residents moving about happy and gay, Ayodhya did indeed put on a festive appearance. Rama was as much the choice of the people as of King Dasharatha. The people had him nearest to their hearts. The very air was full of mirth and joy.

In the Queens' quarters, however, a palace-maid was busy pouring evil counsel into the ears of a beautiful queen. She alone of all found it hard to be happy at the prospect of Rama's coronation. For years she had been serving the beautiful Queen, and she wanted the latter's son to be the king. A woman of great persuasive abilities, the maid-servant Manthara was her name, goaded Queen Kaikeyi to assert herself and get her son Bharat chosen as the King. Granted that Rama might turn out to be a good king, but could that be a substitute for one's own son? All said and done, blood was thicker than water, argued Manthara, and Queen Kaikeyi must needs be very cautious in matters affecting her future. A little indifference now might as well mean incalculable harm later on. One has to read the signs of time, concluded the maidservant.

Having suggested the alternative, Manthara now proceeded to explain how all that Kaikeyi needed to do was to remind the King to redeem the two boons he had given her years ago for saving his life in a great battle with demons. Queen Kaikeyi could now ask for one of the boons to have Bharat crowned the King, while with the other Rama could be exiled to the forest for fourteen years. As the poison started working its way in Kaikeyi's mind, she began feeling that there was much substance in the maid-servant's words and she now made up her mind to move heaven and earth to achieve her aim. Of all his queens, Dasharatha loved Kaikeyi the most. Was it not natural then that *her* son should be given preference in the matter of ascending the throne? The issue was crystal clear. She had to act.

Queen Kaikeyi swung into action immediately. She knew that there was not much time to be lost, for the coronation was fixed for the very next day. Pretending to be very ill, she now sent word to King Dasharatha urgently to visit her apartment. When the aged King did reach her apartment, despite all his preoccupaton with preparations for the coronation, it was a shrieking, screaming and crying Kaikeyi that he saw. The King could not make out what all this was about when Kaikeyi brought out the bomb-shell she had so long prepared for him. She reminded the King of his old boons and demanded that these be redeemed there and then. She asked for only two things: Bharat's coronation as the King and Rama's exile into the forest for fourteen years.

The very mention of these two wishes of Kaikeyi made Dasharatha feel that the ground slipped away from under his feet. Was it his own beloved Kaikeyi who made these demands, he could not imagine. True no doubt that he owed her two promises, but was this the occasion and this the manner of getting them? Stunned with the shock he found himself speechless. The fear of being separated from Rama now assumed gigantic proportions. Oh, for an escape from the curse of Shravan's parents! Darkness descended upon Dasharatha who collapsed unconscious.

Like wild fire the news spread through Ayodyha that Dasharatha had swooned away in the palace. The royal physicians rushed to revive the King. Soon the reason for it all came to be known to the people. The gay atmosphere now gave way to one of shock and grief. 'Rama to be exiled', they began to shout at each other in a frenzied manner. Smiles yielded place to tears, tears to shrieks. All Ayodhya was plunged into grief.

In all this frenzy and anguish, however, there was one man who stood calm and firm as a rock. He fully knew the dilemma that faced the King. It soon became clear to him that the only way out was for him to rise to the occasion and declare his readiness to go to the forests, so that Bharat could be crowned the King. This man was Rama, who was prepared to go to any length to sove his father's honour. Though born a prince, he was the least distressed at the prospect of having to spend fourteen long years in the remote jungles. And so Rama bowed before Dasharatha and calmly departed to the forests. Wife Sita and brother Lakshman accompanied him. For Dasharatha the sun set on that day, never to rise again.

Here ends the first part of Rama's story.

Many were the challenges that he faced in the jungles, the severest being the kidnapping of his Sita by the mighty Ravana. Rama had to enlist the support of monkeys to cross the sea and march into the kingdom of Lanka, where a great war was fought which ended the life of Ravana. The war over, he returned with Sita and Lakshman to Ayodhya and ruled over his people in an exemplary manner. Rama Rajya, Rama's Rule, has remained an ideal, an ideal to be persued, a socialism of a native hue, where the ruler was only a trustee, always mindful of public opinion.

Once in the course of his reign, King Rama had to bow before the bar of public opinion and abandon Sita to the forests even when she soon was due to be the mother of his children. And all this when he knew full well that the criticism was baseless. For the rest of his life, he lived alone, without even coming to know for quite some years that the wife he had abandoned had given birth to twins, both sons. Rama's own concern was others' welfare; he lived solely for others. It mattered little to him if he had to sacrifice his interests and happiness in the process.

The question arises: What is so great about Rama that he has been enshrined and integrated into Indian thought all these thousands of years? Go anywhere in India, ask anyone you meet anywhere in India, you cannot find anyone who has not heard of Rama's story, *Ramayana*. To an Indian mind, Rama stands as the embodiment of a real man, ideal in every respect, a friend of all, the last word in human virtues, one who could be banked upon to come to the assistance of the needy and the aggrieved. And this Rama lives in the people's hearts, this Rama will live forever.

We may conclude that Rama's popularity owes itself to his being everything to everybody. He was an ideal son, a dutiful husband, a generous brother, a responsible ruler. He so conducted himself as to have no criticism levelled at him from any quarter. This has endeared him to one and all, making Rama the man of the masses. He was the recipient of universal love. The monkeys of the jungles not only loved him, but also fought for him.

Rama loved all, strained himself to the utmost to help others. But he always kept his sufferings to himself. While all were invited to partake of his joys, he went through his difficulties and sufferings all alone, he suffered silently. For full fourteen years he faced the fury of the jungles, shelterless, starving and struggling. And all this for no fault of his. And yet we never see in his character even a passing trait of blaming others, either his father or his step-mother, Kaikeyi. Born into a royal family, his fate in the forests was worse than that of a commoner. But he took it all in his stride, working his destined role silently. Later when he became the king of Ayodhya, all rejoiced with him, all had a share in his happiness.

It is this self-effacing nature, which more than anything else, won him divinity. No wonder that *Ram Lilas*, plays based on Rama's story, are enacted year after year all over India. Rama temples are to be found throughout the length and breadth of this country. The people of India consider themselves fortunate to have been born in the land where the Ganges flows and Lord Rama was born.

13th STORY

ANASOOYA

THE LITTLE WOMAN WHO TAUGHT GODS HOW TO BE GREAT

Once upon a time a large meeting was in progress in Heaven. It was a meeting of all gods and goddesses and other heavenly beings. The subject of the meeting was: Who among three goddesses — Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Parvati — was the greatest in all the three *Lokas* (worlds). The discussion was lively as the topic was very interesting.

Lord Vishnu stood up and said that according to his great and wide experience, nothing would be possible without wealth. Wealth happened to be such an essential and important consideration that without it nobody could fulfil his desires. Whatever knowledge one may have, he might even be a realised soul, if he had no backing of wealth, nobody would give him any respect, nor would he enjoy any social standing. A pauper had to run from door to door with a beggar's bowl, and of what avail would knowledge or wisdom be then? In the biting cold of the winter, clothes alone would protect a man, not the blessed Knowledge. Only when one could stand on one's own legs thanks to wealth, could recognition come to him. "Therefore I say," continued Vishnu, "Goddess Lakshmi would be the proper choice to be considered the greatest in all the three *lokas*. Whatever we are seeing is all the result of the power of wealth. Without wealth even comforts are not possible, let alone luxuries. From heaven to hell, go where you will, it's only wealth which opens up immense possibilities. I, therefore, urge upon you to accept my suggestion and choose Goddess Lakshmi as the greatest.

Hardly had Vishnu concluded his short speech in praise of Lakshmi, when Brahma rose to his feet, and addressed the audience thus: "Whatever my learned friend Vishnu has said is perfectly true and nobody can deny it. We all know that without wealth nothing is possible, but at the same time we should know that wealth is not the be-all and end-all of life. We can say that wealth is an important factor in the development of society. But wealth can't claim to enrich one's personality. As we observe, there are many who are wealthy, but are they happy? And how could they be, without the knowledge of how to make use of their wealth? They know only how to amass wealth by any means. But they do not know how to live and let others live. They not only themselves suffer, they also make others suffer. They do not know what is right and what is wrong, nor do they have a purpose in their life. All sorts of luxuries and facilities are theirs, even though they are plagued with the fear that some calamity may befall them.

bringing all their wealth to naught. They cannot relax, cannot even have a good night's sleep. And how could they enjoy life? What then is the use of their wealth?

"Therefore I say that knowledge is the most important factor which teaches people the power of discrimination. Knowledge answers questions like: Why are we here and what should be our life's aim? Further, knowledge makes people understand themselves and teaches them how to behave, relax, sleep, eat, drink — in short, how to live as life should be lived. In the circumstances, I strongly repeat that Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge and Learning, should be your only choice to be considered the greatest in all the three *lokas*. Thanks." When Brahma concluded, there was thundrous applause, together with slogans like 'Vote for Saraswati, Vote for Saraswati.'

The next speaker Lord Shiva stood up smiling and taking a good view of the audience, began speaking with great self-assurance: "I do not want to say much because it is known since ages who is the greatest goddess. If we study social life, we understand that wealth and education are the most important factors without which progress can't be had. I concede that both knowledge and wealth are useful, but none of these can be considered greatest in life. How could Lakshmi or Saraswati be then considered greatest — I do not know. If we lose our wealth or knowledge, we should not worry much, as we could get them all over again. But if we lose our character, we lose everything, even the courage to stand up and show our face to anyone in the society. I have been observing people of different strata and so I could tell you that the wealthiest are the most dishonest, and even well educated people somethimes are lacking in character. No decent society can accept them as worthy members, despite their wealth and so-called education. Society is not able to get from them any lesson or guidance worth following. Wealth and knowledge cannot do much in ameliorating social life. It is only character which could guide society, forever and forever, and make each of its members give of his best towards creating alround harmony and happiness. I have not seen so far any wealthy person being respected unless he also has good character. But look at the other side of things. People of character always command respect, even if they be poor and uneducated. Moral power does not belong to wealth or to knowledge. It is the monopoly of character. Therefore I wish to tell you that Parvati is the Goddess of Character is the most suitable choice to be considered the greatest goddess. I am sure you will accept my suggestion whole-heartedly, because what I am speaking is nothing but an age-old truth. Thanks."

The applause Lord Shiva received was indeed great but supporters of Vishnu and Brahma raised counter-slogans and created almost a scene. However, order was restored after an appeal from the Chair.

As per the agenda, Voting was the next item. and as preparations were being made for secret ballot, the enigmatic divine saint Narada, with 'Narayana,

Narayana' on his lips to the accompaniment of pleasant notes from his Veena, slowly walked out of the meeting. This caused much embarrassment to all the three gods and they ran after him with entreaties that the sage should speak out his mind. After a short while, Narada said: "If you are asking me who is the greatest goddess, then I can say that Anasooya should top the list. There can't be a better choice than she in all the three *lokas*."

At the mention of Anasooya's name, all gods became amply pleased. Vishnu thought that Anasooya was another name of Lakshmi. Brahma imagined that the Saint Narada had meant Saraswati when he mentioned the name of Anasooya, and Shiva was firm in his belief that the names Anasooya and Parvati meant one and the same Goddess, and further that the sage had taken this name just to confuse Vishnu and Brahma. But still they desired clarification, so that there could be no misunderstanding. In reply to their queries Narada said: "What sort of gods are you? Haven't you heard the name of Anasooya, who is the most popular goddess in all the three *lokas*? She is the wife of Rishi Atri. At a place called Chitrakoot on the earth, you could find the ashrama of the Atris."

All the three gods were surprised and shocked on hearing this. How could a human being be considered superior to heavenly goddesses? They wanted Sage Narada to come forward with detailed explanations, but the divine sage refused to oblige them. He declined to add anything more to what he had already said. As a parting message, however, he called upon all three of them to go and verify things for themselves. "There is no substitute for personal test." exhorted Narada, and he moved on with 'Narayana, Narayana', on his lips, the musical notes of his Veena lingering after him.

The three gods now became partners in distress, in that all of them had been equally displeased at the prospect of a mortal, being considered superior to heavenly goddesses. Perhaps sensing their wrath in advance, the wily sage had disappeared in good time. They were eager to see things for themselves, since for gods, willing and accomplishing were instantaneous, they descended on the Chitrakoot that very moment and found the great Anasooya busy with household chores, while Rishi Atri was in a meditative posture contemplating the Divine within. The sight of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva immensely pleased Anasooya. She welcomed them very warmly saying: "O, how blessed I am that the three gods have come as my guests!"

Not wanting to waste any time in the usual formalities, the gods cut a long story short by telling Anasooya that they would deem it a great privilege to be served dinner by her. They were all hungry and tired and nothing would please them more than a good meal served by the lady of the house. A very modest request, one would say, and was it not a pleasure of the hostess to be at home to the guests. Apprehensive at the same time that such a request was too obvious to be uttered, the gods hastened to add a condition on which alone the dinner should be served. And what was the condition? They wanted

Anasooya to serve them the dinner without having any clothes or covering on her person. Here was the crux of the problem; the Gods were trying to test her claim to greatness by cornering her into an impossible situation. If she refused, she would be guilty of displeasing the guests. If she consented — well, how could she consent to move about in the nude before strangers? The gods knew that this was a tall order, but they had the privilege and immunity permitted to guests. Would she or would she not? — this was the question before the gods.

The momentary silence on the part of Anasooya which followed their request was embarrassing to the gods who were naturally looking forward to a negative reply under some scriptural pretext. That would have pleased them because it would have proved that Sage Narada was after all wrong. But imagine their surprise when Anasooya replied: "That is no great thing. I shall gladly serve you as you went me to."

The gods were piqued by her positive reply. Though they had framed their request at an unguarded moment, now only the full realisation of the consequence dawned upon them. What would others make of such guests who would request a hostess to be without any clothes on her person while serving them dinner? Now that they had brought themselves into this plight, how were they going to extricate themselves from it? Such questions assailed them one after another, questions which defied easy answers. It was while they were in this uncertain and troubled state of mind that Anasooya called out to them to go and partake of the dinner to be served in the inner room.

It was a normally dressed Anasooya who waited on them in the inner room. All that was there by way of dinner was a jar of milk. What trick the lady was going to play upon them, the gods wondered. For the dignified manner and self-assurance so evident about Anasooya had put strange fears into their minds. In their confusion they even wished that they had not made such a request, but now it was too late to retrace their steps. In the circumstances, they were to do anything as the lady wanted them to.

Anasooya bade them sit in a circle round the jar of milk. She then dipped her fingers into the Kamandalu of Rishi Atri and sprinkled a few drops of water from it on the guests. What transpired was indeed a miracle. No sooner had she sprinkled a few drops on the three gods than they were turned into little babies, hardly a few weeks old, all crawling and crying. Anasooya now took off all clothes from her person and fed the three babies on the milk. What difference did it make to little children whether or not the lady who fed them had clothes on her person? She had kept her word to feed them with no clothes on her person, but how had she outwitted the gods, and proved her greatness!

Many days had passed but the heavenly consorts, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Parvati, had no news of the three gods who had gone to the Chitrakoot. Naturally they were anxious. Feeling pity on them, the divine sage Narada appeared soon on the heavenly horizon. As soon as they saw him, the three goddesses rushed to the sage and made anxious inquiries about their husbands. True to his nature, Narada began admonishing them: "What sort of husbands you have? They have done a miserable piece of work. How can I narrate here what all they have done? They have misbehaved with that noble woman Anayoosa, and now they are suffering because of it. I don't want to speak a word more on the subject .. Narayana, Narayana".

The words of Narada only made the three goddesses more anxious. What then was the matter? What happened to the three gods? Where were they at that time? The goddesses pleaded with Narada for proper guidance. Sympathising with them, or rather moved by their feminine tears, Narada told them all that had happened at the Chitrakoot. He further suggested that the goddesses should go to the Chitrakoot and beg the noble Anasooya's pardon to get back their husbands. The sage cautioned the goddesses to behave respectfully towards Anasooya, lest they too should invite some punishment like their husbands.

In no time did the three goddesses descend on the ashrama at Chitrakoot. They saw there that one child was sleeping while another was weeping and a third one was being fed by Anasooya. They bowed to the great Anasooya and stood before her in a line. Anasooya warmly welcomed them and assured them that she would be greatly pleased to be of some service to the goddesses, should the latter need anything.

The three goddesses thanked Anasooya profusely for her kind offer and made it clear that they had gone there all the way from heaven in search of their husbands, now transformed into little babies in the

Ashrama. They begged her to pardon their husbands for their unbecoming behaviour towards her. The great lady asked the goddesses to pick up a baby each and stand before her. When she again sprinkled drops of water from the Kamandalu on the babies and turned them into their original forms, it was found to the amusement of all that Brahma was with Paravati, Vishnu with Saraswati and Shiva with Lakshmi. The mistake was soon corrected and all of them bowed before the feet of the great Anasooya, acclaiming her as the greatest in the three *lokas*. And who should come there at the time but Sage Narada, complete with his notes from the Veena and 'Narayana, Narayana,' on his lips, as if to say, I told you so.

Now it was the turn of the gods to do Anasooya a good turn. How could they take their leave of her without granting her some boon worthy of her greatness? Was there any particular wish of hers which she would like to be translated into reality? The gods would be glad to grant her the favour. In the beginning Anasooya was a little reluctant: she had played the role of a mother to the gods, and why should a mother get any boon from her children? But she had to relent as the gods were insisting on her accepting the boon, with all the affection a child would bear towards its mother. Anasooya who had played a foster mother could only have one wish. She wished that each of the three gods should be born to her, she wanted to be real mother to all three of them. The gods assured her that it would be so in due course, and after being blessed by mother Anasooya, left with their consorts for heaven.

In due course Anasooya gave birth to three children, all males. Of the three, gods, Vishnu took birth as Dattatreya, Brahma took birth as Chandra, (Moon), and Shiva was to grow as Rishi Durvasa.

The old saying 'Those who came to scoff, remained to pray' is very true in the story of Anasooya. She played the mother to the three gods, who had come to test her claim to greatness, so much so that the gods became tiny babies before her. Before her greatness, the intelligence of the gods was as good as that of a crying, crawling baby. Judge not, lest ye be judged, is a succinct saying that we would do well to bear in mind when sometimes we feel like throwing a challenge here or there. For all we know one whom we challenge may be more than a match for us.

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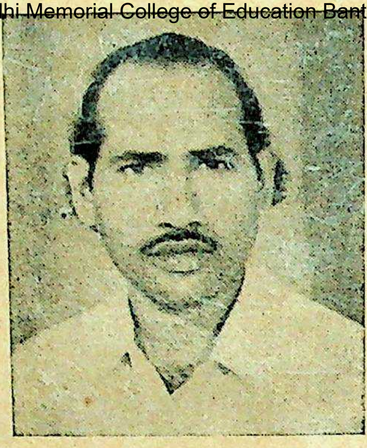

THE AUTHOR

Yogacharya Hansraj Yadav was born on 12 May 1939 in a small village called Gandhavna in Uttar Pradesh. Early in life he was inspired by his father, Shri Sangram Yadav, a devoted follower of bhakti yoga, and by uncle Shri Jayaram Yadav who is poet of Lok Geet and an Arya Samajist. During his school and college days he came in contact with many yogis and later visited many places in search of the true knowledge of yoga. His search took him to the famous Yoga Institute of Santa Cruz, Bombay, where he met Shri Yogendra, Founder and President of the Institute, and Dr. Jayadeva Yogendra, Principal of the Yoga Teachers' Training Institute. Under their guidance he learned the technology and ideology of yoga and for the past many years has been teaching yoga as the science par excellence of "Better Living", thus enabling his students who comprise both the young and the old — school and college students, businessmen, bankers, administrators, etc., — to enjoy a healthy peaceful and contented life.

Under a project of the Government of India, he was privileged to undertake a survey of the yoga centres in the country. He has since felt the need of good literature that will help to develop the potentialities of the Indian youth through an effective portrayal of our rich, cultural heritage. 'Glimpses of Greatness' is a laudable effort in this direction to be followed shortly by his second book 'Yoga for Students' in English and Hindi.